Unholy With Eyes Like Wolves

Morgan Dante

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CONTENT WARNINGS

Rape mention; mention of underage arranged marriage in 17th century; pregnancy; mentions of miscarriages and stillbirths; abortion depiction; violence; death; blood-drinking; blood in sex scenes; sacrilegious use of Mother Mary.

Please be advised that this is a sapphic horror romance for adults, and it has graphic sexual content.

Praise for *Unholy with Eyes like Wolves*

“Indulgent, depraved, and sanguine, UNHOLY WITH EYES LIKE WOLVES is a gory fugue that will have readers cheering for its queer women no matter the wrongs they commit in pursuit of survival and salvation.” – Ladz, author of THE FEALTY OF MONSTERS

“Sumptuous and intoxicating as a black rose, UNHOLY WITH EYES LIKE WOLVES unfurls slowly to reveal the intricate layers of its themes, from forbidden sapphic desire to the religious subjugation of women. A must-read for those who yearn to become the monster and seek liberation through transgression.” – Camilla Andrew, author of THE SANGUINE SORCERESS

“A slow-burn that lures you into its decadence, UNHOLY WITH EYES LIKE WOLVES unspools like the ultimate gothic delight—and doesn’t shy away from grisly indulgence and debauchery. Morgan Dante is a master of blood-soaked sex, and fans of horror romance will be loath to miss this one.” – Tyler Battaglia, PRAY FOR HIM

ONE

1608, 20th of September

Seventeen days before I die, I worry my fingertips into the creases of my dress. Alone in the vermilion carriage interior with a small wooden chest of my clothes, I lean my shoulder against the plush and shut my eyes, trying to relax to the rhythmic thump of hooves. I'm unused to traveling without Sophie, my personal maid.

Mother has cast me out into a respectable position as Widow Nádasdy's personal handmaiden. A status that signifies my need, at the advanced age of twenty-eight, to be redeemed and re-taught. An honor and a shame. A promise.

It's been an all-day journey, but not terrible. Cool and dewy. Despite the late morning start, we've trotted along at a good pace, only taking one break to walk on the path among golden plains and a cloudless blue sky.

As it starts to rain, and the road becomes soft and slick, the journey slows. The trees violently relent their leaves.

Naïvely, as I keep my groggy eyes open, I think that I might try to embroider, but my stomach revolts from the tremor of traveling. Every groove and small stone jolts me awake. Outside the misted window, gnarled branches that cling close to the path twist like inverted lightning; the thunder makes the ground beneath the wheels quiver.

Eventually, the rain lessens, but the day remains overcast.

In the midday, we pass vineyards and workers tending to gray steppe cattle, the snowy kuvasz dogs standing guard like the archangel Michael. For a brief moment outside the carriage, as I walk to wake up my legs, I meet the eyes of some of the tired men, who look away. I glimpse at a dog patrolling the fields, and though he doesn't move from his spot, ever the dutiful sentinel, he wags his tail once, and my spirit lifts as I smile. Lately, my meals weigh oddly in my stomach, so smiles don't come easily.

Because of the light chilliness, the men have donned their sheepskin cloaks and feathered hats of wolf flesh. Over their clothes, they have

arquebuses strapped to their backs. I tug my stole, stippled with sunflowers as yellow as wax peppers and poppies as scarlet as paprika, closer around my shoulders. My brocade dress, lined with gold, is mourning-black.

Then, back inside the velvet, bloody mouth of the carriage.

On the way to Castle Csejthe, a vein of lightning unspindles itself high above the trees. When we are briefly out of one copse of woods and about to enter another, I can see the sky. The full moon, a distant opal, sits high upon the deep blue evening, lined with pink; mustn't be long now. We've successfully avoided the waterlogged causeways of the forest marshes.

To my right side, I grasp the iron handle of the dimly lit lantern, its window crafted from a bullock horn, and I fiddle with the ring, which squeaks. To the left, slightly under the skirt of my dress, I hold my damascus hunting knife, an old souvenir of Apa's.

On top of the carriage are three men-at-arms, one of them András, my cousin; if they are speaking, I don't hear them. Again, I almost drift away, dream-paintings of wild blackberries and tall grasses and forbidden caverns threading through me.

I hear them.

Hooves. Close.

The thundering increases like a panicked heartbeat.

Throomthroomthroomthroomthroom.

The carriage jerks to a stop, and needles and aida cloth fly off my lap. I curl against the corner of the carriage to keep from collapsing to the floor. The lantern falls, and the candlelight snuffs out, plunging me into near-darkness.

Robbers. Betyárs. Sweat tickles my temple. Swallowing thickly, I clench the handle of the knife, my fingers aching.

The hooves pound close, and the carriage remains eerily still as I hear the guttural shouts of men and the clash of metal on metal. A high noise shatters the air, something hitting the carriage.

Gunfire.

Though I've yanked the curtains closed, I peek out. Forest shadows obscure the flurry of limbs.

I freeze, trapped in this wooden cage. Defiance roils in my stomach.

Shouts. Curses. Thuds. My heart crystallizes in my throat, a knot in my stomach. András. I want to rush out and save him, to put myself between

him and any attacker, but I know I can't. I'm only barely good against an unarmed man by using some element of surprise, like teeth.

Even as a woman grown, a widow, I feel like a girl. My bones hurt.

The odor of metallic smoke creeps into the carriage. Someone shot their gun. Do robbers carry guns?

The carriage creaks. The knife handle doesn't bite into my hands, but my nails do. Another blast, and my mind tries to disentangle what lightning and guns sound like. Before I can—

The door swings open, and a man pokes his head in, his pale blond mustache like a feathery slug above his wet, pink mouth. Though he wears a brown hood over his head, a block of thin leather acting as a crude breastplate, I see his wild eyes, as green as mine. The sheen of sweat and dried blood on his brow and the leather of his jerkin permeates the air.

He rises, trying to fully enter the carriage, and my mind empties. A red cut on his open hand, reaching for me—he, no, I did that.

I'm doing that. With my father's knife—my knife—

With my knife, I slash the robber's open palm, shocked at how my swipe barely slows as the sharp point meets skin, and he flinches in surprise. Nausea weakens my stomach into water; more than ever, I feel faint, especially at the sight of blood.

Stunned, he instinctively flinches backwards before his lips curl. A sneer of rage.

I stiffen, waiting for his next move, but then he collapses with a sick crack as the butt of an arquebus meets his skull, and I see András' wet, pale blue eyes, his face damp with sweat. I go to step out of the carriage, but I only get one foot out, half my skirt, before András holds up a protective hand.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see uniformed men on black horses.

"Who is that?" I ask my cousin.

"The Countess' men." He waves a hand. "Dear God, Noémie, stay inside. This is nothing for a woman to see." Already, I see a severed finger beside a ring of toadstools, and that cracked skull with a rupture of pink and red matter springing out like flowers.

I pierce my cousin with a look. "András, I must speak with them. Let me out."

With a wary look, András nevertheless helps me out of the carriage, a gentle hand on my elbow.

Still mounted, six men approach us in thick, furred cloaks and hats; I recognize the emblem on their tabards, a serpentine dragon curved to eat its own tail. They are begemmed in metal blades and guns.

The most flint-eyed of them, a handsome man with a black beard, his gray gaze lined with experience, looks to the ground and shakes his head. “Damn bandits. They’ve been plaguing these woods like Hell’s demons over the past year.” He pauses, looking over my face. “My lady, forgive me if I’m brusque.”

“I forgive you,” I say, “since the Lord has always taught temperance.” I smell blood and smoke.

Sternly, he admonishes, “You should’ve given notice. I believe the Countess was expecting you tomorrow. Had I known, our men would have met you before you entered the forest.”

“Yes,” I reply, swallowing a joke that my mother couldn’t wait to toss me out. I offer a coquettish smile. “I thank God that we did meet, regardless.”

It has the intended effect. This churlish man falters and bows his head once.

A faint groan by the carriage. I turn. The man who tried to attack me stirs. Already, two of the militia men, their furred cloaks billowing with a slash of wind, go to apprehend him. The back of his head is pouring blood, which also blooms on his palm where I cut him.

I wonder if my husband Miklos would’ve saved me. If he were around. I wonder if the wheels, soaked in blood, will crack over the broken corpses, which will become a part of the earth. But surely, someone must come to dispose of them.

“My lady,” András calls me, though we used to play as children. Perhaps in another life, we might have married. “Are you certain that you’re all right?” He stops when he sees the knife in my hand. Doubt so close to fear flickers in his eyes. He must be thinking that the rumors are true: I am truly untameable. Wild.

Feral.

I lower my hand. “Yes.” I make my voice soft, pliant, as if I can’t believe what I’ve done. I’ve shamed myself. “Is anyone hurt?”

“Farkas was hit over the head, but he seems to be fine.” András jokes, rapping his knuckles on the side of his head, and I give a start when I see the blood caked there. “Hard skull.”

I hesitate. “Dear God, are you all right?”

He turns to obscure his wound. “I’m sorry. You don’t need to see this.”

Ignoring him, with the help of my knife, I tear a strip off the skirt of my gown, his hand over mine as we press it to the shallow wound to staunch the flow. Until the captain, with a raised brow, says, “Perhaps we should travel forward while the rain has cleared.”

His voice is a rumble accompanying the disagreeable thunder. When lightning streaks the sky over us, my bloodied fingers become pale as bone. Yet, true enough, no more rain falls.

“What is your name, sir?” I ask the captain.

“Captain Ervin Szabó, my lady.” A pause. “We are close,” Szabó says as I stand, “only fifteen minutes away, thereabouts. The vagabonds waited until you were almost completely out of the woods to cut you off. Bastards. Come, my lady, we’ll help you into your carriage.”

“Thank you, dear sir,” I gently tug the cloth, clotted with blood, from my cousin’s shallow wound, “I think I can find my way inside.”

We leave the bodies of four robbers on the ground, their horses scattered. The fifth, a wiry man dressed all in black, is dragged callously by some of the militia soldiers, but as the carriage moves, and András joins me, I don’t see what happens to him. I imagine he’ll be hanged or shot near the river, where the executions stain the bank black.

We pass through the sleepy hamlet of Višnové, where, even as night approaches, women dump dirty water from their basins after a day of laundry and children begin to retreat from their mud-stained play amid wandering goats and chickens. When one boy, inspecting the carriage, locks eyes with me from behind the glass, I offer a weary smile, already feeling so distant from the violence that happened but still smelling the harsh copper. Feeling it dry on my hand as I crumple the ruined fabric in my fist.

Under the shadow of the castle, which scallops the road, we encroach upon brightly dressed figures in the grass, sitting around small fires and sewing clothes or inspecting pots and pans.

The pungent scent of the horseflesh they are selling leaks into the carriage. It mingles with the citrus-sharp pluck of a cithare, which echoes

along the autumnal hills in the dusk, a painting of primary colors.

As the carriage passes through, a giant looms: the white limestone castle, set atop one of the highest hills. The land underneath us hitches, as it inclines.

I admire the bright rows and rows of golden wheat, higher than my head, like the granary of Demeter. Curious, I look out all the windows, to my left, in front of the fields, are carts of herbs, and to my right I see the mercurial hip dance of candle flames reflecting on black marble tombstones in the cemetery.

To my right, green and brown striations go for miles and miles in the earth. The many vineyards that help give the Countess her profits, outside of, of course, her inherited wealth. Besides cattle and grain, wine is by far the most advantageous venture. Though Widow Nádasdy is not known to keep such harsh labor requirements of her workers, Mother once mentioned her exorbitant tax demands of the people, only accepting money or good wine as payment. It’s no wonder there are people who take to robbery.

Across from me, András takes a handkerchief and tiredly wipes off the knife for me, and, after a pause and flash of undetermined emotion in his eyes, he gives it back. I slip it into my wooden chest.

Before we arrive, the carriage clacks against a moat bridge and stops once at the castle portcullis. When the journey ends, I suppress my sigh of relief. Yes, that’s what I must be feeling, but why is my stomach like a stone of salt, as hard as bone?

Over my shawl, I don a sleek ermine cloak; however, when I step out of the carriage, it doesn’t seem to be needed. Grass caresses my knees.

Mist clings to the grounds and embraces the castle limestones; through the woods, where the valleys deepen, lights in their single-story houses; wildflowers; medicinal herbs; damp grass; and lingering blood. I stumble, and my cousin catches me by the arm as I stare at the castle. Its foundation looks forged from the white, rocky land it’s conquered; yes, the rocks are limestone, too. No better way to make a castle out of nothing than to use the materials at your feet.

Two of the militia men go to carry my chest on both sides, taking it by its iron side handles.

On the steps, a white komondor, a sheepdog, runs up to sniff me. I reach a hand out, and his cold nose inspects it.

“Careful,” András says, “those are the Countess’ guard dogs.”

“He looks absolutely vicious,” I reply, patting the canine’s head. “Like an ominous portent.” He wags his tail, licking my fingers, and runs back to the heavy wooden entrance to the castle, which stands with one of the doors open.

There looms a woman in a brown dress and white apron, holding a lantern. She’s squat with braided silver hair, and she must be no taller than five feet, if that. Her face is thickly etched with age. The men who are carrying my chest speak with her, and they disappear, Castle Csejthe swallowing them.

I exchange a look with András, and he offers a curt nod. “Good luck in there, my lady. I’m certain you’ll do well. Lady Nádasdy is known to treat her girls well.”

Girls. I am not a girl who’s menstruated for the first time and must have my parents arrange a respectable marriage. I am nearly nine-and-twenty and widowed, needing to be re-taught like a hound who’s forgotten not to puddle on the rug.

I pull him into a hug, the metal edges of his leather armor digging into my cheek, threatening to draw blood. With a sigh through his nose, he returns the hug, and then leaves me. I tug my sleeve down to hide the blood.

“Hello,” the old woman says, “you must be Lady Esterházy.”

I still think of “Lady Esterházy” as what everyone calls my mother, not me. She wears it well. For me, the mantle is unwieldy.

I offer a perfunctory smile. “Yes.”

“You’ve arrived early. I’m sure the Countess will be pleased.” I’m not certain if that’s meant to sound as ominous as her low voice makes it out to be. “You may call me Dorkó.” It sounds too familiar; I wonder if it’s what Widow Nádasdy calls her. “I oversee all the maids. Though you will answer to the Countess more closely than the others, I will show you the castle.”

The fires in the lantern and the nearby braziers make her thin face moon-sallow.

This close, I see the wrinkled snouts of gargoyles leering down at us, their vast bat wings acting as shields from some of the remaining rain.

Dorkó pivots on her heel with a silent grace, despite the thickness of her pointed shoes of sewed leather. Normally, a servant might wait for a noble

to stroll past them before entering a hall. The way she carries herself, I wonder what her background might be. I look behind me.

At times, I think of what it might be like to run far away. Perhaps find a witch in the woods, learn spells and drink ambrosia. Most likely, I'd trip over a root and break my neck, and the wolves would feast on my bones and marrow.

Before I follow, pooling my hand under my necklace, I lift St. Saturnina's doleful stare to my lips and kiss her cool silver eyelids.

Straightening my back, I prepare myself to meet with the lady of the demesne, and I march forth. The bruise-black shadows of the castle entrance swallow me.

TWO

I am fortunate; I haven’t yet reached my death. I have no reason to complain or cry. I must keep my head high.

I must be steel, always always always.

Strong as Mother.

Always.

As I stare at Dorkó’s back, I mustn’t think of Mother’s frown and disappointment when I told her that I couldn’t stay in the empty manor house I once shared with my husband. She took it as an affront, like between her and Widow Nádasdy, I thought myself too good for my fate.

Too good to be a widow and wander dead halls like a ghost.

Make no mistake. I am a ghost. Yet, I will keep on.

When she stops and faces me, Dorkó’s brow knits when she looks down at my torn skirt. “Did something happen to your dress?”

Despite hiding my sullied hand from her under the layers of my clothes, I tell the truth. She’s no fool, however; if she says nothing, it’s because she doesn’t need to. “There was a skirmish. Robbers attacked us. I tried to help my cousin with his wound.”

She presses her lips together in thought. “Hm. If he were still here, I’d recommend putting basil or parsley in his food. It slows bleeding.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

“Indeed.” She bows her head and continues.

I follow Dorkó into the manor house where Widow Nádasdy eats either with guests or her court. When she leads me into the vast dining hall, I halt at the threshold and take it all in; though my own estate is not modest with its colorful walls, I’m shocked at the beauty here: Flemish tapestries line the walls, bordered by laurels, scarlet berries, and many-colored flowers.

One depicts, over a millefleurs background, two women in dresses of deep red, stately blue, and sunset orange; they embroider together under a persimmon tree, its bounties like fat little suns.

Below my feet stretch Turkish carpets with geometric and fractal patterns, all in scarlet or night blue. On the far right side, opposite of the looming hearth as big and hungry as Jonah's whale, sit five wooden chests, which are tall enough to reach my middle and boast complex metal locks; and of course, there's the long dining table in the center of the room, which may seat about one hundred and fifty people in an opulent banquet, where all the goblets and dinnerware gleam silver. The spicy mix of perfume and savory food still lingers in the air.

Above it all, centered among the primary color tiles against white bricks, in stone, are both dour and triumphant angels. Two feminine ones on each side of the head chair, each clasping their hands in prayer. One with her head bowed, another looking up in ecstasy like Mary Magdalene having a divine vision. Their plaits are long and limp. Another one in the center, a tall and muscled man, might very well be the Archangel Michael, armor over his robes, a carefully carved sword planted in place by his fist, his hair a bed of thick curls, his jaw angular and set.

The entire room is a clash of color and austere gray, right up to a vaulted ceiling, like a cathedral with rainbow mosaics in the sullen stone. Decadence, but with that tinge of reverent doom and meditation, these paradoxes perfectly in unison.

A blend of cultures, too. Many bed sheets, curtains, and rugs are designed from Turkish dresses, sent as gifts of truce; no one of status under the Habsburg Crown in the Hungarian diet would ever wear a Turkish garment in public, even if it was a gift from the Sultan himself. Especially if it was a gift.

But the nobles make use of them, as well as adopting Turkish flower and fruit arrangements, doing their best to cultivate oranges, apricots, and date palms, while taking delight in Mediterranean coffee.

Overwhelmed, I smell smoke and blood, a battlefield of bullets and lightning. I brace myself against the high arch entrance, stone ripples digging into the fabric covering my elbow.

Dorkó also shows me the kitchen, at least thrice the size of the one back home. Women and girls in aprons sit on stools and stones, the room rife with the clang and scrape of pots and plates that rows of scullery-maids scrub furiously like the Day of Judgment has come. I can smell the barrage

of spices piled into the food. Crushed paprika, wax peppers, garlic, marjoram, and celery seeds.

When the head woman takes me to the main hall again, with its arched ceiling and rows of candelabra, she stops at the storming of feet. Two people rush down the stairs spilling in the center of the room. I take pause at an older gentleman, followed by a woman in a blue dress and stylish silver surcoat who primly folds her hands in front of her. Though they are older, they are flush, breathless, and grinning like youthful lovers. Or like two people sharing a joke at someone's expense.

The man wears a pepper-yellow robe with a wolf fur collar and a sable cap with turquoise feathers sprouting off the side. His round countenance boasts a full, immaculately groomed black mustache and beard, streaked with white.

He shakes his head and strokes his beard as his smile melts into a frown. "Damn that woman."

I recognize him, but not his companion, with her nicely plaited brass curls and a gold web of gleaming freshwater pearls at her neck. She wouldn't be out of place as one of the sirens who tried to lure Odysseus and his men to their salty graves.

The man is Lord György Thurzó, Widow Nádasdy's neighbor and a close political friend to the Habsburg Crown. He came to my wedding, too, smiling very easily after a few doses of brandy, his voice like silk. It's rare to see him without his furs and rings and ruffs.

A good friend of Lord Silvas, the wolf in my bedroom.

I must be careful around him.

He limps, a hesitation in his right leg, likely gout. Favoring his left, he leans on a black cane with a silver eagle head. He catches my eye with that shimmer of recognition while he grips the short brim of his hat.

Damn it. I'm worried enough about Widow Nádasdy. About forcing myself to look tame, mild mannered at most. Where any slights are charming and not evidence of how I'm ruined.

Without introduction, Thurzó says, his voice like a sleeping stallion releasing his wind, "Ah, it's been so long. You look so much like your father, my lady, a joy and a sadness, blessed be his name. He fought well in the skirmishes with the Turks."

"I have always been proud of him," I say, crossing myself.

Thurzó extends a hand toward the woman beside him. “You’ve met my wife, haven’t you?”

Trying to sound pleasant, I say, “I don’t believe I have. It is an honor.” I rack my mind for just why I haven’t seen her and why she wouldn’t have been with her lord husband at my wedding. Perhaps she was abed with child or at court. In Vienna, noblewomen in good favor love to ride around the city and buy out shops with the finest cuisines and dresses. No doubt I’d love getting lost in that sapphire of a place.

Under her lovely brass curls, his wife’s face is rosy and heart-shaped; I anticipate there is a smaller difference in years with them than I had with Miklos, but she must use a good amount of vinegar to make her face this smooth. Seeing the grains of foundation makes my own face itch; as twilight settles, I’ve had my own lead powder on since nine in the morning. How oily and wan I must look, fatigue draining the blood from my face and neck.

“Lady Erzsébet Czobor,” Thurzó introduces fondly, as if saving his wife the need to do it herself. Czobor. She must be related to Baron Czobor, the former Palatinal Governor of Hungary. Perhaps his daughter. She’s pretty, and reminds me of a childhood friend, Zuzanny, who I once kissed, as girls do, under an apricot tree.

When she smiles, her lips are exquisitely bright with rouge. She wears the brilliant hues of her dress well, carrying its beetle bones like she was born to do it. I seem to recall that Thurzó had been married before her, but I can’t remember if the marriage ended in divorce or death.

Now, through their cordiality, I see the hesitation of their waxen smiles, their reluctance. The carefulness of Thurzó and his wife makes me wish I hadn’t failed, and yet, there’s something valuable to no longer being the invisible, timid daughter of Lord and Lady Esterházy.

I’m known. Volatile like the hedonistic ancestors of the Widow herself, those dragons in human skin.

Perhaps the nobles, with their cunning betrayals and games, will think twice about crossing me, holding out their hands to a mad dog.

Or they will ruin me. Lock me away. Slip hemlock or wolfsbane in my wine.

Lady Czobor smiles sweetly. “A pleasure to meet you. I’m in awe of the military feats of your father, and the loyalty and generosity of your mother.”

Her eyelids flutter in a way that says, Y*ou poor, stupid, helpless thing. Born for tragedy and failure. Born under a bad star.* "I am so terribly sorry for your loss, dear." She purses her lips.

"Losses," I murmur, as they stare, perplexed, the head of the maids simply watches with her hands steepled.

Lady Czobor recovers quickly, if she ever noticed my slip in decorum by correcting her. "I know that your husband is in the Kingdom now. And the others—well, I lost my son János years ago while he was still in the crib. I know that it's hard, and I hope that your next marriage and births will be kinder."

Miklos, my husband. By the time I had my first blood, when I was ten years old, I was already promised to him, twenty years my senior.

I didn't marry him until I was nearly sixteen, and for over a decade, I worked to love him and to impress his mother, who was responsible for tutoring me in the responsibilities of both a wife and a lady of the house, who must manage the monetary affairs while her husband is away at war.

His prickly beard. His reddened cheeks. I tried. It wasn't fair to him, how fickle I could be. He was a kind husband. I didn't love him, but I didn't need to. Marriage is first and foremost a political alliance, a maneuver for security, but how can you be with one man from age fifteen to twenty-eight and not feel anything? Guilt still comes.

He loved best his tippling and hunting. When he came back from war, and I smelled the badger grease in his beard, apricot brandy flavored the air as he embraced me, my nose on his broad shoulder.

My grief is cold and numb, a chasm I cannot explain in any language. I grieve that I can't truly mourn Miklos, and then I feel guilt for wishing for the sorrow of my mother and women like Widow Nádasdy, so I might feel like less of a monster.

I should be more grateful. Any failings of the marriage were mine, my inability to have a baby that drew breath long outside the womb.

I can only be a mirror. Think of what Mother would say. Show them my teeth, but nicely. "Thank you. Your kindness means everything, and I am sorry for your grief, too." No, Mother would've changed the subject already, maneuvering it to a comfortable landing.

On a more auspicious note...

Thurzó squeezes his wife's shoulder. "I cannot believe that the Countess kept us so late, Beth." Yes, there we go.

As they bar our way, and Dorkó stands back as any servant would, I dare to ask, "What is the matter?"

Thurzó replies breezily, "Nothing too dire, only a matter of securing that the right people are in their proper positions in the local parishes. But we must really be going." He looks me over again. "It is quite late for a visit."

"Yes," I state.

As the lanterns, braziers, and candles on the stones blink around us, I only offer a pleasant expression, hoping they may think me simple. That way, they underestimate me.

I wonder if such a performance will work on Widow Nádasdy, if I tighten my laces enough.

After Thurzó and Czobor depart, I look over my shoulder. Dorkó watches me, the icy expanse of her eyes imperceptible as they flicker across my face.

She says, "He is a frequent guest of the Countess." Like fog in the dip in a field, her voice lowers at the word "guest."

I face her fully. "I see. They must be friends." It is a bluff; I cannot see a Catholic and a radical Calvinist having much in common, which is a shame, since here I am, a Catholic relying on the goodwill of a prominent Calvinist.

"That isn't the most irrational assumption." So, they are not. I must remember that. Neither the widow nor the lord are those who should be trifled with.

As Dorkó passes me and ascends the stairs, I arch my back and follow close, nipping at her heels. "How many people work here?"

"Twenty-six maids and thirty-six field workers."

For a powerful chatelaine, Widow Nádasdy's court and household are small. I suppose, with as many estates as she has, it would be troublesome to travel between her own lands with a large retinue. Nevertheless, I'd expected at least a hundred, maybe two-hundred servants.

As we make our way to the vast first floor hall, we pass mahogany doors and ivory vases lined with gold and silver. "Will I be sleeping in the gynaeceum with the other maids?"

She halts, and I almost collide into her, stopping as she turns to look at me in vague horror, glancing down at the gold patterns of my mourning

dress. “By God, you’re the daughter of Lord and Lady Esterházy, aren’t you?” The tone of her voice makes me question that myself.

“Yes,” I reply, not adding that I am until the Countess tosses me out, and Mother disowns me. “I thought I answered that clearly.”

“As a proper lady, you will have your own private quarters, and the Countess often has her personal attendants. At times, she likes to have a maid stay in her bed, especially with recent lapses in her health. She’ll let you know when she requires that of you.”

The idea of sharing a bed with the Countess makes me uneasy. It seems harder to hide that way.

Our stop concluding, she leads me up another set of stairs, which curl like a seashell along the side of the castle’s proud walls, lined with spindly, iron candelabras. The corners of this estate soak up the darkness, making an early night feel like midnight, no matter the amount of boisterous tapestries with bright colors.

As we reach a landing, I ask, “What are these health concerns, exactly, so I may know how best to help her?” Yes, that’s it. Be helpful.

Dorkó bows her head. “I will let her tell you.”

She leads me to one of the uppermost stories, where the Countess’ private solar must be.

THREE

The events of the day sink in. Not like teeth but like stones, like the melancholy of early morning.

I'm about to speak with Widow Nádasdy.

I've met Widow Nádasdy before, of course; she even came to my autumn wedding thirteen years ago, her dress scarlet and gold.

In the yellow-green hills, where children played and men readied for the tourney and the hunt, the air was smokey from roasted oxen and pigs and smelled of butter, which melted on hundreds of loaves of bread. Sweet batter rotated on the spit. My mouth was thick from honeyed wine cakes topped with oranges and lemons and spiced with ginger, nutmeg, and saffron. Goulash made of pig's blood swam in wide bowls alongside carrots, garlic, parsley, and onions.

Widow Nádasdy's deep brown eyes were almost as dark as her hair, black locks tied immaculately, under a silk and gold crespine. Pale-haired Lord Nádasdy was there, too, blue eyes bright as he drank his bittersweet wine. Not once did she sip from her own glass. She offered me a small smile and gave her congratulations and prayers for my health. Though her words were diplomatic, carefully chosen, she felt far away, disinterested. She and her lord gifted me a necklace of aquamarines, which ward off a husband's infidelity.

Her lord husband's death is rumored to be more than what it was, the stories that he was stabbed by a whore he refused to pay. Salacious but unlikely. He was riding his horse in a patrol, only for his legs to cramp. He complained of pain, retired, and died the next day in his tent.

Mother whispered to me over a cup of persimmon tea, "But you know, with how her husband despised the Habsburgs, the rumors are revenge."

"What does Widow Nádasdy think about the Habsburgs? The Emperor?" I asked.

“She’s never said.” That was hard for me to believe. No idle political chats in any parlor? She also told me: “You must be strong,” I know the true meaning: You can never be weak.

Weakness gets you killed.

In 1514, György Dózsa, a Transylvanian, Székely man-at-arms and veteran of the Ottoman wars, led a bloody peasant revolt in the Kingdom of Hungary. He trained forty-thousand field workers, priests, and students to become a consolidated hajduk force. With his loyal brothers and furious working men, he burned down hundreds of castles and manor houses, until the sky grew black and red against the sea of green Carpathians. He crucified and impaled the gentry, from governors to affluent bishops.

When Dózsa was defeated in battle by Lady Nádasdy’s grandfather, he boasted that he wasn’t afraid. Soldiers dragged the shackled leader to a newly forged, scorching iron throne and set him on it, so the molten chair fused to his clothes, scorching them and bubbling his flesh. And a crown, also of melting iron, was set upon his head, fusing to his smoking hair and skin.

His men were forced to their knees as the esteemed lords' guards dragged his youngest brother to the throne.

As Dózsa wept and begged for him to be spared, the men unsheathed their swords and hacked the boy to pieces. And then they forced the remaining rebels to swallow Dózsa's roasted flesh, as he still lived, moaning in agony as his men were forced to set their tongues on the white-hot pliers embedded in his skin.

Seventy-thousand peasants were tortured, and some beheaded in the verdant summer fields.

Since then, lords have had a stranglehold of more power over the serfs, so much so they likely wouldn't protect their lords’ lands if need be, with the hatred sown into the land.

The strong eat the weak, and the weak are shamed for it; sometimes, the strong make the weak eat their own.

The terror, the executions, the hatred, the cannibalism, it’s normal. Sometimes, a mother rabbit must eat its young to survive.

The empire goes on and we agree, yes, this is the price of civilization. For us, this isn’t savagery like it might be if anyone else does it, but a sacrifice.

Weakness gets you killed.

I could tell you the name of my wetnurse, Dorkás, but not of most of the maids who raised me or any of the men in the fields. Like one forgets the colors of a painting they pass every day, I forgot about them; they were faceless shadows.

Ghosts.

My stomach cramps queasily. A nagy hal megeszi a kishalat.

I palm the silver medallion of Saint Saturnina at the hollow of my neck. Her dark eyes flicker down to my fingers, that melancholy stare set in her head, which she holds in her hands.

We pass paintings of nude maidens and nymphs in river streams and autumnal pastures, chasing one another and braiding flowers in each other's hair. My attention lingers on one: a plump woman, her skin brown, long hair a burnished bronze, lounging, legs stretched out, under a tree of white flowers, holding a golden apple in her beautifully crafted fingers. Her gaze is half-lidded, content.

Then, I realize it's a diptych because the second painting, to its right, has the same naked woman on her knees, long tresses dull, fingers reaching out to a man who's walking away into the burning sunset. I can almost imagine the caption: *Eve, After*.

Most of the doors on this hall are closed, making the space feel narrow. The windows are frosted over. The back of my neck itches as I try to map an escape route, should anyone accost us.

We pass two guards at the top of the stairs and a room where I see the glint of cithare strings and a piano, and then the washroom, which she shows me. I gape at the tiles, wreathed with orange paprika flowers and mums atop a teal background, leading to a circular ivory bath shaped like a keyhole and carved into the center of the room, toothed by steps and surrounded by ionic pillars. How sinfully nice I think it must feel to bathe in that washroom.

Back in the hall, farther down, a waifish young woman not much younger than me cleans dust off a massive golden vase, which appears to be more like a Greek urn. When we approach her, she gulps. She has her tufts of ash blonde hair tucked behind a cream-white scarf, the same color as her apron. My guide doesn't so much as acknowledge her.

Dorkó waves to the closed door across from us, right by the maid. “Here. She will be through that door, no doubt working on missives and reports.” This late? She points to the end of the hall. “Her bedroom is there.” Outside the room, I notice a small bell attached to a string. She meets my eyes again. “Is there something wrong?”

“My chest,” I say, my hand twined in my saint necklace.

“Do you have pain?” she asks me, stone-faced. The maid’s face and ears pinken as her eyes flit to us.

I lower my hand. “No, not that. My possessions, in my chest. I didn’t see the men come down.”

“They will be in your room.” She strolls past me and pushes open the door behind me.

When I walk inside, I see a place not too terribly different from my room at home. The bed is a good size, its silver-teal sheets and tasseled pillows the creamiest velvet. To the left of the bed is a dead hearth, to the right a barren mahogany desk beside a bookshelf that is built into the stones. Over the desk hangs a tapestry of a birch with golden leaves.

At first glance, it looks like a white-skinned woman with yellow hair. The Beautiful Lady, lifting her silver veil in the dark woods and leading children to their doom in unknowable fairy realms.

Turkish curtains festoon themselves around the bed, the silver geometric patterns forming flowers on the midday-blue silk, which tapers to the cobalt-colored rugs covering the stones. Of the tiles that are visible, so the door won’t scrape against the thick fabrics, I see lilies encased in circles, the designs bisected with horizontal lines. By the bed, past the narrow, arched window that’s dewed with the spittle of rain, is a sturdy wardrobe.

My chest squats at the end of the bed, but that doesn’t unloosen the knot in my lungs.

“The room is lovely,” I say to Dorkó. “Thank you.”

“Thank the Countess,” she replies, brusque, moving away from the door.

When she leaves me, she slinks off with feline speed. By the time I leave my bedroom and gaze down the long hall, there’s no trace of her.

Standing at the peaked wooden door where the Countess lies beyond. I listen. From somewhere, the trickle of water. A faint rustling. Shuffling papers. A fireplace crackling.

I raise my hand to knock.

“Wait.”

I freeze before I turn. The maid comes close to me, lowering the cleaning cloth by her side. I watch her warily, her eyes shuttering multiple times like bird wings, and I flinch when one of her fingers brushes the side of my arm.

She squeaks and pulls away. “Sorry.” She must think I loathe her touch because I am a noble and she isn’t. It isn’t that.

My gaze flickers from her to the guards’ backs. They feel so far away. So much could happen in this long stretch of space. I don’t even know if I can trust the men ordered to watch this hall. And when her attention follows mine, she trembles. The poor thing. I realize I have far more power than her, and despite that, she’s trusting me.

Looking up at me, eyes round, she says in a low voice, “Two women were found dead in the woods, including her old lady-in-waiting.”

I blink. “When?”

“One died two months ago, another last week. No one knows why.”

Mother didn’t tell me about that. Mayhaps I am a lamb brought to the slaughter, but no. Mother isn’t so cruel as to dispose of me. “Who knows about this?”

“The Countess has hidden it from everyone, but I thought you should know.”

I look over her drawn, taut face. “What is your name?”

She pauses.

Eventually, her countenance of a fearful pallor, she mutters, “Zoé.”

I nod. “Thank you, Zoé. I will keep your words in mind.”

The mounting dread wells inside the kernel of my heart, and the maid twists the cloth between her fingers, dirty soapy rivulets dripping down her hands.

She bows her head and shuffles away.

Swallowing thickly, I stand outside the Countess’ solar. I imagine being watched from beyond the walls. Or that the widow must be spying on me through the lock.

When a surge of blood rises to my throat, I lift my fist, nails cutting into my palm, and knock once. It seems too loud, echoes through my bones, and swiftly, I lower my hand, an apology on my lips.

From inside the room, a voice says, “Come in.”

FOUR

Numbly, I do, surprised at how bright the fire is in the mantel. The orange and yellow light basks around the entire room, in contrast to the tapestries imbued with sapphire-blue dyes, oceans surrounding waves of scarlet poppies and roses. There’s a towering, peaked mosaic window of a nude man and woman picking dandelions in a garden under the watchful eye of a glowering fig tree. I admire an iron, mechanical clock set into the wall; the short and long hands now slightly past VIII.

I inhale deeply.

Her solar is made of warm stones and wood panels carved with the figures of angels. All their mournful faces are bathed in the light of the hearth, which seems to take up the entire left half of the room. Like my bedroom, or rather, the room she's given me, there are bookshelves built into a wall. I glance over them. Histories. Philosophy. Poetry. Glossaries on folk medicine.

I see her there, a dark bloodstain against the arched window, ringed with moonlight. Her spine is curved as she sits at her desk, poring over parchment, a streak of ink on the outside of her thumb.

Widow Nádasdy is in contrast to the tones of the room, a cool slash of acrylic. She resembles the clock the most. Her dark, angled, and tall silhouette convulses against the walls, in cadence with the dance of the flames. Her chin is long and so strikingly sharp it could cut glass, her brows sculpted thick and black as onyx, Silver hairpins restrain her dark curls.

She twists her gaze to me, as I stand by the door, hand on the knob. The deep lines of her face and pale lips are stark, less like a rosy confection and more like a statue. In the firelight, she looks harsher than she had at the wedding feast, and I feel small.

Palm on the desk, she stands at her full height, movements fluid and assured. Widow Nádasdy doesn’t take up space; she commands it.

The Countess, the royal blood of Transylvania. The dragons who eat their own tails.

I envy her. I feel like the stone walls might devour me.

She passes the iron chandelier, with half the candles out, the others burning low, and I brace myself to speak with an imperious giant of satin and lace, a pillar of ice. Yet, as she approaches me, I realize she's inches shorter than me. A consequence of, as Miklos would tease, my obscene height.

As the hearth burns, there's a scent of woodsmoke mingling with vanilla. Harsh and thick, but intoxicating, like tobacco. Then, as she waits before me, I realize it's her.

I can't stop drinking her in.

"I heard your journey was perilous," she says, contralto voice a thick husk, like the rheumy sea wave rasping its salt over sand. "Your mother should have told me that you'd be early." I can't tell if my jumpiness is leading me to imagine her accusatory tone.

I remember jerking the knife forward, the split flesh on the robber's hand. I am more than my fear; even my fear keeps me alive.

"My apologies."

Expression unyielding, she raises a coiled hand to her chest, as if holding a missive, and replies curtly, "No need to apologize on your mother's behalf. Go on." She gestures to the vermillion divan behind her. "Sit."

As I obey, slipping past a gilded console table, Widow Nádasdy sits across from me in a plush chair, back straight, hands furling over the armrests. She looks like a queen on her throne. The fire simmers in front of us, as I settle on sleek velvet.

Those dark, shrewd eyes crackle, too. Flicker over my face. I imagine what she sees.

The lines around my mouth from either laughs or frowns. Both. Green eyes ringed with gray around the pupils, both wide and shielded. A hailstorm sky, my father once called them. My nose, which wrinkles if I ever press my bottom lip, a muzzle. That stray wave of dark blonde hair curled over my right brow, the one that always looks arched in judgment, always set slightly higher than the other even when I'm resting, and the faint line between my brows that makes me look more severe. Disagreeable.

And my lips, always pursed.

Mother tells me I always look two ways: amused, as if finding jest in everything, or angry. Both aren't advised in the company of our betters, who might think I am finding humor at their expense.

"Your hair and eyes are far too wild," Mother would say. "Especially these little curls, they just fly everywhere!"

If I were undressed before Widow Nádasdy, if she were the one who would bathe and dress me, she would see the birthmark on my right shoulder, a dark red spot like blood from a pinprick. The small mole on my lower navel. Imperfections. Vulnerabilities. And then, the violences life inflicted on my body. Born under a bad, mad star. When the winter wind howled and the dogs shrieked in the night.

I might as well be naked under her hawkish stare.

The Báthorys are "touched." By greatness, by God, by madness. Degenerates who bathe in blood. Promiscuous women who sleep with men, women, and the Devil.

The Countess is no god, of course. She is a woman, but whether she is capable of terrible things, I cannot say. If she is guilty and has had her staff killed, the path grows thornier. Should she be caught, unthinkable for a woman of such immense influence and power, I'm unsure what would happen. Perhaps she is truly too well-off to inspire a coup.

But if kings and Caesars can be overthrown, so can she.

"I suppose it's useless to ask about your journey," the Countess says, cutting through my thoughts. "The captain told me you were accosted by bandits.

"It went well otherwise, my lady," I reply steadily, "though I've heard troubling rumors."

"Rumors," she repeats, mouth a dark line.

Meeting her eyes unflinchingly, I say, "There are stories about the deaths of some of your maids. I heard days before I arrived."

"And yet," she says without waiting, as if my knowledge doesn't surprise her, "you didn't hesitate to come."

"No." I don't want to elaborate and mention that a maid told me.

Without compunction, she explains, "They were killed on the outskirts, near the trees. Throats ripped open. I suspect a wolf. There are more patrols

at night, should you feel unsafe. I had hoped word wouldn't get out." a sharp breath through her nose. "But it always does."

"Is that what happened to your last lady-in-waiting? I think I should know, so I don't suffer the same fate." I quiet myself then, worried I've gone too far already.

She waves a hand. "Yes. For your own sake, don't go in the woods at night."

"How are you sure they were killed there and not positioned in place? It seems odd that they would be out in the woods at night."

"You've thought about this. And here I thought we might discuss your duties first, or that I might ask if Dorkó answered all your questions about the castle." I must imagine the dark humor in her voice. "No trails of blood. If they moved the bleeding corpse, they must've done so without ensuring there were any marks on the grounds."

"Could it have been one of the guards?"

"I doubt it. It looked like it was done by an animal. I don't know why the women were in the woods." No one I know willingly travels at night, by horse, carriage, and especially on foot, even to clear their heads. A woman is especially trained to remain inside or, if need be, ask for a chaperone. "Stay inside when night falls, and I doubt you have much to fear. Now."

She clasps her hands in her lap. They are refined fingers I can't help but trace into my memory. My cheeks prickle as I realize just how beautiful she is, in the same way this castle is both aged and new, austere and opulent. I wonder how smooth her palms must be. "Let's speak about other matters. Is there something else on your mind? I imagine you must be exhausted from your journey, especially if you were accosted, so let's keep it brief."

I say, "I noticed the people on your grounds."

The widow doesn't so much as blink. "What do you mean? You'll have to specify which people."

"The travelers. My father, when he was alive, would often cast them from the grounds."

She leans forward, her voice hard. "Their people have served as good soldiers. They know how to craft weapons and ammunition better than many of our own. When we aren't at war, in times like these, they mend our pots and pans. And the guards enjoy their music at night. If they continue to

act as good God-worshiping men and women, I see no reason to exile them.”

“Could they be suspects?” How odd to think I am speaking of murder to an esteemed Countess, as if we are equals working toward a solution.

“Some think so,” she replies, keeping her distance.

I shouldn’t press, shouldn’t come off as suspicious, but I’m curious. I only ask: “What do you think?”

“No, they are harmless.”

Certainly, on its face, her reasons aren’t altruistic, no extolling her deep love of the downtrodden, but they are rational and would ring true to any Habsburg agent. No one would accuse her of being soft-willed, dominated by irrational emotions or imbalanced humors.

“I see.”

“If you feel unsafe here, I would understand. I didn’t mention the deaths before because”—because the disappearances and deaths of poor maids are common, and no one cares whether they ran off or were raped and murdered by a lascivious nobleman—“I feared word getting out.”

“Do the families know?”

“Yes, I’ve compensated them.”

For their silence? “I don’t know if something like this can have compensation.”

Her mouth tightens, as if she’s tasted something bitter. “You are right. There’s not. I can only do so much. Without a man I can prove is responsible, my only currency is financial.”

I bow my head. “Thank you for your generosity, Lady Nádasdy.”

A twitch in her jaw. I’ve said something wrong. My heart plunges into the pit of my stomach.

She tilts her head, half her face as bright as the moon, the other cast in purple shadows. "Certainly, I dearly miss my lord, but please, call me Lady Báthory, or Countess.”

“Yes, of course.” I swallow. “Lady Báthory.”

“How old are you?” she asks me.

“Eight-and-twenty, Lady Báthory.”

“Your mother did impress on me that you are at an age where she seeks for you to remarry. It does seem soon.”

“Does it? She’s only planning. She will give me my year to mourn.”

“Even then.”

Despite my issues with my mother, I rush to defend her. “I’m afraid the years have been unkind to us. Since our lands were plundered in a raid, we have little for a dowry.” And being under her wing, with her pay, will change that.

Her brow rises. “Yes, I understand.” Does she? I’m not sure. “However, it is better to wait and procure a good marriage than to settle for less.”

“Yes,” I reply, “I agree, Lady Báthory.”

“I appreciate you confiding your troubles to me. If I am to let you into my chambers, to attend to my needs, to be in my bed should I need an attendant, I need your absolute honesty.”

I swallow thickly, the taste bitter, like coffee gone off. “Of course.”

“Know that I don’t need you to unleash your secrets, but I cannot have them interfere with your work. As the daughter of an esteemed war hero and baroness, I expect you to attend me well, surpassing all the others.”

“Yes, Lady Báthory. I will surpass your expectations.” My place is a liminal one. A lady with a station above many of the poor women in the estate, but below Lady Nádasdy, who I will undress and pamper like any other faithful servant.

“Meet them,” the Countess orders. “That’s all I ask. Though your family has seen hardships, understandable ones, and your situation is peculiar, I know that Lady Esterházy would not send you if she did not think you were capable.”

Oh, Mother would, if it helps her reputation.

The Countess folds her hands over her stomach, where the gold lace forms a V over the crimson ocean. “Has Dorkó shown you your chambers?”

“Yes.” I hesitate, not certain how to broach the subject on my mind.

“What is it?” Even her questions feel like commands.

I suck in a breath, holding it in my cheek. “She told me you have health worries that may require me to stay with you in your bedroom. I was wondering perhaps what your...” I fumble for the word, momentarily lost in those dark bird of prey eyes that reflect me back to myself. “What the matter was, so I could best assist you.” I am horrified to realize that I’ve been flailing and twisting my fingers in my hair.

The Countess tilts her head in thought. “I have something, an illness. My parents would call it a demon that comes over me, or a witch’s curse,

though no visit from a bishop would cure it.” I pause, waiting for her to elaborate. “Sometimes, I have spasms for seemingly no true reasons. Convulsions. Over the years, they’ve grown less frequent. As a child, they would occur twice a week. Falling sickness, it is called.”

“Ah. I’ve heard that can be a sign of genius or greatness.”

“It is a sign, according to some, that my humors are diseased. Or I am damned.”

“Do you believe that?”

“What I believe matters not. It is a matter of posterity, which brings me to an inquiry your mother was reluctant to answer in our correspondence. She was surprised when I agreed to take you in, regardless.”

I swallow thickly and settle my twitching hands in my lap. “Yes, Lady Báthory?”

The fire makes her eyes bright, scorching. I wonder if this must be what the young French martyr saw when Michael came to her in the garden with flames licking his greatsword.

“Why did you almost bite out Lord Silvas’ tongue?”

FIVE

Of course. None of my secrets are mine. None of my shame is mine, yet I must carry it.

Tears sting my eyes. The bastard, the bastard.

I can’t be smaller if I tried. I want to disappear into the cushion, slither inside them and never come out.

I push down my emotions. Inconveniences.

The Countess continues, not unkindly, “You must imagine my position. A woman of almost thirty, needing my guidance. Your mother is no fool, nor was your mother-in-law. So, I can’t accuse them of poorly teaching you."

Yes, it’s my fault. Always. An immature idiot. A liability. Mad, violent. Despite the agreement, she'll find me unworthy with only a look and cast me out.

I straighten my shoulders. God as my witness, I didn’t survive a bandit attack or Lord Silvas’ aggression only to cower and beg Countess Báthory to keep me here and deign me worthy.

“It seemed like the thing to do at the time.” I press my tongue against my teeth. Stupid. If she isn’t in a generous mood, she might consider me insubordinate to her face, which the firelight renders harsh. I can see a vein under her left eye, like watercolor, and I can see how her flesh conforms to her skull like elegant wax.

I bite into my cheek, and blood floods my mouth.

Evenly, Lady Báthory says, “I’ve heard of ladies going wild after their husband’s deaths. It can be hard, I know. You are tutored for one task, your purpose, and then it ends.” Though her voice doesn’t soften, nor do the edges of her expression melt, it seems that she’s empathizing with me. Two widows.

I don’t know how to take her reaction. Or lack thereof. I swallow blood.

Then, her voice grows hard, demanding I listen. “Here, you must perform well and understand the trust I’ve placed in your mother. In you.”

I force myself not to blink or look away, no matter how the inferno beside us makes her brown eyes burn, surrounding my reflection in the mirror of her gaze.

More coppery blood slicks my throat. “Yes, my lady.”

She nods, a slight tilt of her head. “Your duties start tonight. You will take care of me when I must retire to bed or I need to bathe. You will attend any functions where I require your assistance.”

“Will you need me to sew or learn languages? Mathematics?”

“You are free to study what you wish on your own time. As for my basic educational duties, that is for the young unmarried girls I teach. I trust, as Izabella’s daughter, that you know well enough.”

I lower my head and pretend it doesn’t sting.

It’s true that I know a few languages and how to count, but nevertheless, I can’t help but feel that I’m behind.

“Noémie,” Lady Báthory says, louder than she was, and I snap up my head.

“Yes, my lady?” Heat floods my cheek.

“Have you eaten?” she asks me.

“Pardon, my lady?”

“You traveled all day, and you look peckish.”

The blood drains from my face. Yes, very helpful. “I had a honeyed cake this morning." I’ve been craving sweets all day. When András offered me flaky bread or soft and pungent pálpusztai cheese, which melts in your mouth, my stomach halved. Truly, though I feel hollow, I’m not hungry.

“Yes, but it is night now,” the Countess tells me, as if I can’t tell the time. “Do you need me to have a maid retrieve something from the kitchen?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. The scullery-maids are already cleaning. And if I were to eat anything, I’m unsure if I would retain it. For the first time since I was a child, when I tried to eat legume soup yesterday, I only ended up vomiting it up.

“No, thank you. Your kindness means much.”

Looking at the writhing hearth, Lady Báthory scoffs.

Jaw hard, I ask her, “What do you need from me?”

The Countess looks down. “What’s the matter with your hand?”

My heart lurches. “That skirmish...” *When I sliced a man’s palm open. Are you sure you want a wolf in your bed chambers?* “I tended to my cousin’s wound.”

She stares. If she notices my lack of forwardness with details, she doesn’t mention it. “Clean it now. I would prefer that you are not blood-covered when you attend me.”

I obey, stiffly rising off the divan to go to the basin by the door, dipping my hand in cool water.

Still not looking at me, the Countess rises. “I’ve decided to retire early this evening.” I wonder if her conversation with Thurzó is the cause of her ire.

As she passes me, she continues archly, “Once you are sufficiently clean, come to my chambers and dress me for bed.”

I read between the lines: Undress me, first.

Once my hand is clean, I follow her.

I want to laugh at the thought that I’m proceeding toward my own funeral, that I’m a ghost. Me, the lady-in-waiting to the most esteemed woman in the entire land and the lands next over.

And yet, I remember the bitter brandy, a hint of cinnamon on Lord Silvas’ rancid breath, his loosed erection on my belly. His tongue forced deep into my mouth, a sword finding a sheath, but I denied him. Clamped down. Tasted his acrid blood.

When I sliced open his tongue, and he jerked his hands off my bruised wrists, on my pillows, I resigned myself to the fate of a prideful, obstinate bitch who must be retrained.

A mistake. My ruination.

Shame, I think, *as irrational as it is. I once liked cinnamon brandy.* Sleeping peacefully, too, without fear of a man using his good reputation to slip into my bedroom during a party.

In some situations, they castrate attempted rapists. But not a lord like him, the son of a man who saved a fortress from an Ottoman attack, who took back a garrison compound. A drunkard, a lech, but he never stained the name of his father like I’d soiled mine.

My heart shrivels small and hard, my mouth dry.

The Countess’ bedroom is predictably enormous, the octagonal ceiling with its poppy designs expansive, the room twice as large as mine, though similarly decorated. Tapestries of trees, fruits, and nude maidens. She does like her naked nymphs, doesn’t she? The floor rugs and curtains boast Turkish floral designs.

Her canopied bed is larger than mine, barely able to fit its wooden frame. Unlike the teals and blues of my room, her sheets and walls are deep garnet with gold embellishments. Instead of a single wardrobe, she has two, which likely only contain a fourth of the clothes available to her.

She leads me to one and shows me its contents. It has two compartments, one on the bottom with all manner of shoes, boots, and slippers, and the top with meticulous stacks of lace and linen chemises. The other contains several dresses of lace, velvet, silk, taffeta, and cambric.

In the corner, between the bedroom entrance and the hearth, rests a vanity and a silver standing mirror. On the surface lies a vast variety of powders and perfumes. She slips in front of the silver mirror, hand on her shoulder, index finger rubbing circles into the ruffled edge of her collar. From the glass reflection, her not-eyes meet mine.

My face is flushed. The fire from the other room, I tell myself. This room is much cooler, the rain and autumn chill settling in.

“Well?” Lady Báthory murmurs.

Here I am, a near-stranger, her friend’s daughter, and now she expects to stand naked before me, my hands on her. She expects me to peel off her clothes and undo her hair without ripping it off her scalp. Then again, I have become used to being undressed by maids, of standing in the nude without self-consciousness, though I often felt a flare of embarrassment from my stretch marks.

Why is this any different from a maid’s usual duties?

Schooling my expression, I amble behind her, my chin at the crown of her head. When I glide my hands forward, I find purchase at the top wool button of her deep red dress, crisp against her skin. I suppress a tide of demureness. A flutter, that cramp below my navel.

This woman is no tiger to wrangle; she is my lady, the most prominent lady in Hungary. Richer, perhaps, than Lucrezia Borgia. Yet, it’s as if her presence feels the room, and I can never truly know her.

Digging my fingernail under a thick loop, secured beneath the top button of her dress, I pinch it and unclasp it, revealing that first hidden expanse below her shoulders.

Clumsily, my thumb and knuckle skim over the top of her spine, and I feel her body stiffen and then go liquid; at my touch, she's taken a deep breath.

It might be easier if she were taller than me, so I might not have to bend and feel as if I were towering over her while I fuss with the buttons.

The buttons trail down to her waist, and though the first button showed more skin, I very slowly uncover her undergarment: a white, flowing linen chemise with nothing else under it, which unfurls in a fluid tapestry down the bountiful curves of her hips and spine, as I tug her dress down, and it falls from her body like oak leaves in fall.

"I would like a fresh one, from the drawer," Lady Báthory states. I expect her to mention that her dealings with Thurzó made her perspire, or some gossip Mother would regale to me while pluming her fan, adorned with white lotuses.

After I retrieve a fresh chemise, I'm surprised to see her facing me when I turn. No, this is normal. Sophie would do the same for me, helping me shuck off my chemise as if it was nothing but water.

I pinch her underlinen around her hips, slipping my fingers under a heft of fabric, careful not to linger too long as I bundle the linen up to tug over her head, as she raises her arms.

When the Countess is fully nude before me, she pivots away again, her clothes puddled on the rugs by her feet, I observe the constellation of dark moles speckling the back of her right shoulder. The small, black curls under her arms and on her legs.

Over the slope of her shoulder, prickled with gooseflesh, in the mirror, I see her stiff, pink nipple, which hang low below white stretch marks. how strange that she is cold, but I realize that though the solar hearth roared, her personal bedroom hearth was neglected. Forgotten.

It seems unthinkable. Or perhaps it is expected of me to light the fire to keep her warm at night. Perhaps she dismissed the maids, not wanting to deal with them in the background.

To me, there, she is both flesh and stone. With more haste, I let the nightgown unfold before me, its hem only reaching a few inches above my

ankle. Now, our heights are less of a burden when I encircle the chemise over her head like a halo and pull it over her arms and head, letting it fall and drape itself over her, the fabric white as virgin December snow.

Without a word to me, she glides over to her vanity and sits. Waits. My body trembles in worry about failing what I should do next, but I shoo my worries away. This is a test.

As I hurry behind the Countess, she stiffens, as if anticipating I'll clumsily yank at her scalp. After all, despite my experience, I've ended up in this position. Too old to have many social options and too young to have pride in my acuity.

My day is catching up to me. A snarl on my mouth. Blood running down a man's hand. Coating my throat.

When Mother's health has faltered, and she'd snap at the maids, I'd quietly tell them to go to their chambers and help her with her hair myself. As my hands slide over one of the pins in the Countess' raven-dark nest of hair, I'm too conscious that though she cannot see my hands behind her head, she's watching my every moment.

I inhale sharply through my nose, and I take down her waves in pieces. Her body is as motionless as one of the gargoyles or angels around the castle.

Even with the mundane nature of my work, my mind straggles on the image of Countess Báthory naked before me, staring up in expectation. I pray she doesn't see the flush of heat on my cheeks and throat.

A curtain of hair falls down her back like an executioner's sword, shining like satin. I step away, waiting for her to stand. She doesn't.

I ask her, "Do you need me to stay with you tonight?"

Her chin cranes down, her eyes half-lidded. "No. Not tonight."

"Shall I light the hearth?" I ask her, having watched the maids at home do it for so long.

"Yes." She pauses, eyes frozen on me. "And extinguish the fire in the solar. Do you know how to do it?"

Mouth dry, I say, "Yes, to both."

I go to the mantel shelf and pick up pieces of iron and flint left at the end. My hands are damp now as I bend to light the fire. It takes me over a minute, but I manage to produce a small flame that creeps along the wood.

After I’ve taken water in a wooden bucket and have extinguished the solar fire, I come out to see the Countess standing outside her bedroom door, staring at the maid in the hall, who bows her head.

Tersely, the Countess says to Zoé, “Girl, before you retire, help the lady prepare for the night.”

“Yes, Countess.”

I murmur, "Good night, Lady Báthory."

“Hm, good night.” With the deaths on her demesne, I can’t help but feel a sense of foreboding at her farewell. We say such things at night because we know very well that no sunrise is guaranteed for any of us.

The Countess closes her door, leaving Zoé to follow me into my bedroom.

As I did with my lady, she helps me undress and slips a fresh chemise on me. I insist that she doesn’t take St. Saturnina off me.

When I’m alone, and the quiet swells, the Countess’ brusque perfume lingers.

I haven’t shaken the feeling of being watched. Nevertheless, I exhale; I’ve succeeded and survived tonight, so surely, I can do it again and again.

Before I curl into bed, I lock my door to ensure I won’t be intruded upon.

SIX

21st of September to 1st of October, Night

When my sleep-crusted eyes crack open, my queasy stomach turns, and the room is dark and still warm from the smoldering hearth. Though my muscles are sluggish, I ease out of bed and use a poker to prod at the logs and fire.

After, I uneasily drift back to sleep, and when I wake up again, I'm cold, the fire long dead. Zoé starts another fire and assists me in adorning my simple blue dress, not a garment that'll outdo the Countess. She's quiet, almost grim.

That morning, before I start my own duties, the Countess sees me shivering, though I try to hide it.

"There are extra blankets and robes in the wardrobe in your room," she tells me. Her hair tumbles down her left shoulder, looking soft, a raven on snow. "Make use of them." She leaves it there.

Despite my previous bravado, I worry so much about the first day of proving myself that my throat closes, and my stomach grows woozy. Woozier. I will fail, and this will be it. There's only success and failure, only two paths.

I will fail. I'll be made to marry a man, maybe the one who raped me, so what he does after will only be him receiving his due.

And yet, the first day passes, and then the next. It's almost terrible that nothing momentous happens because I wait for my fortune to be certain.

Goosebumps spread across my arms and legs as I stand before the mirror each gray morning. I tell myself that God and all the saints will see me through. That Christ and the martyrs have endured far worse. That I must hold up my chin and keep going forward.

Every day, five minutes before six, the bell outside the Countess' door chimes. Once, twice. Given the thickness of the walls and door, it is muffled. If the hearth were crackling, I might miss it. I even have dreams where I miss the bell.

But I never do.

As I wait and pace in my room, I thumb my saint necklace. St. Saturnina, the celibate virgin promised to a lord who decapitated her when she protested his attempted violation, so she rose from the dead to drown him with her hands. She carried her own head to the church, where the reverent villagers, in awe and pity, buried her.

Sometimes, I sit on my bed and, threading it around my fingers like a rosary, I rove my thumbs along my aquamarine necklace I've brought with me. It reminds me too much of Miklos, the life that should've been, so I keep it off.

I leave my room, fully dressed in an outfit the Countess offered me while I was speechless.

"It's what all my ladies-in-waiting typically wear," she explained to me with no change in her expression, "though don't worry, this is a new one."

Meekly, I stared for a good while until I thanked her.

It's a marvel, a green taffeta dress with a pleated waist, a square neckline, lace accents on the hem, and a white underdress—beneath with ruffled, dove wing-shaped sleeves—that reveals itself where the dress splits in a narrow V between one's legs; this linen beneath the smooth verdant fabric is lined with silver leaves and berries.

It is a matter of duty, of me making myself presentable as the handmaiden to a Báthory.

Nevertheless, I found it hard to speak when she did this simple thing. Of course, what is it to her to give away an expensive, beautiful dress?

I might not be wearing what belonged to a ghost, but now I must look like one, the woman before me who was found with her hair snarled amid the briars.

I find it difficult to believe the days have passed, that the orange sickle of October hangs over us.

In my uncertain haze, I dress Lady Báthory; I attend breakfast and dinner with the Countess; sometimes, she leaves me to embroider or study poetry in Hungarian, Latin, and German, though I don't know the latter. There are populations of German-speaking people near us, but of the five languages I know, Deutsch isn't one of them. Blumen, blooming. Flowers. The Countess that I read the holy scripture in different languages, which helps when I can put them side by side.

My room boasts an array of histories and romances, and I feel like a bud that's twitched partly open, but only partly.

Only one time, I've slipped away to sit among the hills, watching the fields of wheat sway below. Anyone who sees the Hungarian wilds must believe in God. From the White Carpathians, burnished gold and red with the promise of autumn, to the meadows where the beheadings happen.

There, after a few minutes of peace, I was greeted by Ervin Szabó, the Captain of the Guard I met after the bandit attack. His presence wasn't as disruptive as I thought, as he was quiet as he approached, though I heard his boots trod on the soft grass. As I sat with my legs stretched out, he stood at a distance, removing his helmet.

"It's a lovely day," he said, voice deep and rich. When I met his brown eyes, they drank me in, but he maintained his rigid pose. "Aren't you afraid of staining your dress?"

"I'm doing my best to treat it kindly."

"Of course, my lady, and you are wearing it well today. I shall no longer disturb you, so that you may enjoy the weather." He smelled smoky and metallic, and my heart raced as I imagined the croaky rasp of his beard on my lips.

I don't see him often, but he really is quite handsome when he smiles, and his severity has that same appeal as the Countess; that indulgence of seeing their softer half.

I've heard that the lady of the castle is dagger-tongued and capricious about many things, such as her appearance and hygiene. But to me, she is reclusive, hidden in her carapace. Careful.

She hasn't yet asked me to undress her for her baths, though she'll have me set out her clothes in the washroom. It is as if her bathing is more intimate than dressing for the day and undressing for the night.

Before all else, every morning, Countess Báthory always goes to the basin and cleans her hands with water. Then, she stands before the mirror where I examine her, and she watches me examine her. I lift off her chemise and dress her in a new one, smoothing out the wrinkles by running my hands over the linen, which disguises soft-as-cream, veined plush of her body.

On her hips, her stretch marks rise like crooked fingers before the pale linen falls over them. Her dresses are usually some manner of red.

I knew red could be harsh, but I never realized it could seem so frigid and passionless. Controlled. On days she must meet with another noble, which has only been once, she dons a ruff.

Today, she doesn’t. I fasten the wool buttons, cursing myself when my hands slip, as if I’ve failed in my embroidery. Yet, she doesn’t scold me. We do this ritual in complete silence. Quiet. Enticing, as if I've been tasked with wrapping and unwrapping a dear, clandestine gift.

I suit her in a satin gold dress with a crimson surcoat that she slips inside with ease, as if it’s her own skin. I wonder if it ever chafes. Sometimes, I see the pink impressions her clothes have made on her skin, the same they leave on mine, but she never winces or complains.

I’m shocked at her patience. Has the Countess herself ever dressed a girl or woman? I doubt it. Her daughters would have their own maids straight out of the womb.

I prepare the lady for a world of eyes and teeth. That will judge how she talks, how she walks, how she dresses her hair and body. Whether she is too curt or long-winded. Whether she is too frigid or hot-blooded. Whether her eyes dart away too quickly or linger too long.

After undressing and redressing another woman a few times, I think I might be able to grow used to it, this ability to maneuver this one part of my life, to have some role in molding her, of seeing who she is before she steps out into the world and then witnessing who she becomes under my hands.

I can have some pride that I have given this dragon her scales and wings. I feel like a companion-in-arms, straightening her shoulderguards and polishing her sabre.

She doesn’t act shy or hitch a breath; this is her duty, and she always performs. The stoic Countess, as I saw her at my wedding, dressed in elaborate brocade patterns with rubies as a bloody tourniquet at her throat. The austere mother and widow.

She dwells at her vanity with the oval mirror; she has two mirrors in her room for two different tasks, one for dressing and another for makeup, which takes longer with the procession of glass bowls of lead, blaunchet, and carmine, the latter crafted with cochineal beetles to get the perfect, full erubescent hue. In the spirit of the Queen of England, some mix their lead foundation with vinegar to smooth away any lines.

The Countess’ mirrors and these many pieces that will become her make her body something I quarter and reassemble, a canvas others will inspect and cull. One reflection for her face, hair, and neck, the other for the rest of her.

Fingers on the polished brush with its boar bristles, I ask her, “How would you like me to do your hair?”

As she applies the powder, an imperceptible expression already molded there, she tells me, “A braid atop my head.”

While I work, she doesn’t so much as look at me in the mirror. She’s too busy applying her mask. Her eyes are distant but not unfocused, as if diagramming her schedule for the day. For the finer tangles in her deep waves of curls, I use an ivory comb to free them, only tugging when I absolutely must. Her hair is layered and hard to master, but I remember caring for my mother and let my memory guide my hands.

Delicately, I twine one black wave, smoothed by the brush, over the other. I would often braid Mother’s hair, as it was easier to manage.

I lift her braid and pin it in place around her head, a crown. After, I secure a net of pearls over the curled plait.

When I was young, before I had my first blood, I was a brute with pomegranates. I marveled at how their skins would soften, like any fruit, but I could squeeze their full, sweet nubs between my teeth and feel the seeds snap. I would tear into them with my fingers and bask in that satisfying crack when I split it and a honeycomb of garnets greeted me, while many fell and others ruptured.

One day in the study by the hearth, I’d taken some from the kitchen and gorged myself on them like a horned ördög eating souls. Aba came, shook his head at my greediness, and knelt to show me something, taking out a slender knife.

My father was a burly man, but with a blade, he was dainty and precise. He carefully, holding the knife vertically, cut open one of the pomegranates on the table, so it revealed what I thought was a little hat with a spool. As he cut the tough fruit into quarters.

I was shocked at how little juice he spilled.

With Countess Báthory, I must treat her like a pomegranate: gently. I dress her and tend to her hair. And when the day is over, despite the cramps in my belly and my queasiness, I will take off every layer I’ve applied at her

discretion. The stiff bones of her dress, of the clasps, at first refuse to yield. I brace myself, and I find a way inside. Then, her bodice. I de-armor and de-bone her. Peeling away the waxy skin to find the hidden compartments of seedy jewels.

So, too, I strip the Countess of her layers and then reassemble them. I cannot dig in the knife too suddenly, too harshly, and hack away at her armor with reckless abandon. Cannot swallow too much or reveal everything at once. Perhaps, in that way, we're both hard fruits. The only thing I don't know is if Lady Báthory seeks to apply a knife to me.

She inspects my work. “You are doing a fair job of this so far,” she tells me, not thanking me; this is my duty. I’m doing well.

So far.

And I find myself pleased with my work but frustrated. Best that she doesn’t thank me for my service. I might soon disappoint her, and I shouldn’t worry about that. I have enough to fret over.

We sit in the magnificently large dining hall, which might be my favorite room, especially in the evenings when the hearthlight plays upon the bright tapestries and carefully etched gargoyles and angels.

When the Countess first had me sit beside her and had a plate set out for me by one of the scullery-maids, I looked at her with a tacit question.

“No matter your transgressions, you are a proper lady,” she told me, and that was that.

Now, there is only silence, except the occasional scrape of silverware on porcelain. Yesterday, I achingly stomached a concoction of honey, figs and raisins dipped in brandy and set alight. The smoky honey and figs were diving, but I had trouble with everything else. I carefully chewed the bits of bacon, served with slices of ginger and lemon.

Today is Friday, and for Friday, a good family always eats perch, mingling in olive oil and lemon juice with a glistening stack of shallots, asparagus, peppers, and peapods, curving inward like claws.

As I peer down at my food, my teeth scrape against one another, and I cannot shake my focus away on the pulse throbbing behind my right ear. I mustn’t whine, mustn’t disrespect my good lady’s hospitality.

So, I stab one piece of fish with a fork and dart it between my lips. The juices from the pink slice stick to the roof of my mouth, it's texture thick and too slow to grind to slush under my teeth.

My stomach is a small, hard kernel, and the fish tastes odd, metallic. For the past three months, my taste hasn't been the same.

Sometimes, I think that I could eat all the honey cakes in the world. Or blood stew, and by God, I normally hate stew. And fish soup with paprika, even though I've never craved any slimy sea creature in my life. I lift the fork to my mouth and chew another piece, which is bitter. How fickle my senses are in my condition.

As I pick at slivers of fish, I don't look up to see if the Countess' dark but lovely brown eyes are scrutinizing me with aquiline precision.

"It is certainly becoming of a lady to eat slowly, but you must eat, first of all."

Instinctively curling my hands in my lap, I say, "Forgive me, Lady Báthory, but I am not hungry." I look up to stare at the corner of her sharp jaw, unable to meet her eyes. If she sees me, she'll cut into me, and she'll know.

"You weren't hungry when you first arrived. You must be like Orsik, subsisting off honey cakes."

Orsik, or Orsolya, her eldest daughter. She and Katherine, the youngest daughter of fourteen, are in another part of a castle, their own hall, and they often eat with Ilona Jo, the wizened maid who schools them. I've never seen them.

"Yes," I say apologetically. "I do like honey cakes. I'm afraid my inert appetite has become common." A simultaneous hunger and nauseated lethargy, along with every food I eat having a strange metallic aftertaste. "I'll try to eat more. I certainly don't want the meal to go to waste."

"Anything left will no doubt go to the maids and the Romanies. That's not why I mentioned it." I run my tongue over my teeth, and the Countess stands while a scullery-maid takes her place. "Now, I must conduct court."

As if sensing that I'm off, Lady Báthory doesn't even invite me to dinner or to attend her. Have the evening to yourself, she tells me with that impassive countenance.

I bite my lip, wondering if I've already ruined everything. If anyone would realize that I'm defective or foolish, it's her. A sour taste floods my mouth.

I have a stupid urge to tell her what's wrong. And that when I have enough money, enough means, I might steal away in the night. Leave her, why not? There's no love lost between us. I'm not sure if there's even respect.

Again, I wander the grounds, swamped with a light mist, and stumble across a dead fox, covered in flies with jewel-eyes and yellow maggots, the wound at its stomach black, its eyes shut, body desiccated. The stench of decay invades my nose, almost bringing up what little I ate, a hot surge in my throat.

Putting some distance between it and me, I watch fish swim in the moat and, after, I pray in the chapel. Then, in the gloaming, I go back inside before the sun fully disappears.

As the starry night spindles across the breathtaking hills, the White Carpathians stalwart in the distance, I snarl myself horizontally by the fire, tightening my shawl over myself and clasping my saint necklace.

Some say Saturnina is a myth, but whether her story is a myth or lie, it's true to me. If St. Saturnina can rise and thrive to be a beloved daughter of God, so can I.

As I rest on the cool stones, they dig into my linen chemise, imprinting on my arm. I can't find it in me to be bothered. I settle my hand on my stomach, pressing hard, waiting for something to reach back.

Nothing. I have one of the small satin pillows under my cheek. The smoke, mingled with the burning tallow on the nightstand, lulls me to a near-dream doze, where shapes of color, not quite resembling real things, contort in the black of my eyelids. If it were raining, I'd already be asleep.

A scream.

I bolt up, my neck screaming in protest at the swift motion.

Another. Reedy, strained. The hairs on the back of my neck rise.

Lady Báthory is screaming.

SEVEN

My blood goes cold and spreads needles down my arms.

Before I can storm into her room, I see that the door is already open. One of the guards, a man with peach scruff on his chin, looks into the room with his jaw set. He says nothing to me as I rush past.

She's writhing on her back. At first, I think she's having a nightmare, a midnight terror; when I was a child, I would scream and toss in my bed or sleepwalk, finding myself in the hall with a wary maid or guard speaking to me.

But her eyes are open, and they flicker to me.

They aren't frightened, only tired. Her body spasms, and a sound erupts from deep in her throat, short and soft, but like bone against bone. Something I can't name. Bubbling spit erupts from her throat.

Instinctively, I go to the other side of the bed near the window and set a hand on her shoulder. It feels more of an intimacy than undressing her. My mouth is dry.

I look at the guard at the door, and he steps into the room.

Fearful that she might choke, I slip one hand under the back of her head and her back, and leaning over her for a brief moment, I gingerly raise her and roll her on her side with the help of the guard, so the foam and saliva pour out of her instead of bubbling in her throat.

"How did you know to do that?" the guard asks me.

"My husband, he..." Sometimes, my husband would have these episodes, but when I asked if he had falling sickness, he laughed it off; a God-fearing veteran such as him couldn't ever be so morally weak to contract that. "What else can we do?"

The guard looks toward the door. "I'll have a maid bring some sage tea."

I want to ask him to not leave me alone. I don't, and he's gone.

Not knowing what else to do, I only keep a hand on her back, feeling the twitch of her muscles under my palm. Each minute, the number of

convulsions lessen. Despite having been in this situation before, the sensation disturbs me, these spasms that I have no control over, but I stay until she goes very still, and she draws a long, ragged breath.

“Can you hear me?” I ask her.

A weighty silence. I pause as her breathing slowly returns to normal, as she draws in the smoky air. Her dried sweat, evidence of her disturbed humors, is between us on the sheets.

Voice hoarse, her back still to me, Lady Báthory replies, “The seizure didn’t take away my hearing.” There she is.

“Yes,” I reply, a little dryly. If she still has her barbs, I hope she isn’t in dire straits. Despite my worry, I’m amused by her grousing.

“You said your husband suffered from this?” the Countess asks me, rolling over on her back. A streak of wetness lingers from the corner of her mouth to her cheek.

“Yes, some nights. When he was home.” I stand and head toward the wardrobe with her underlinens. “Do you need a new chemise, Countess? I would like to change these sheets.”

“No,” she rasps, balling and twisting the front of the chemise in her hand. "this one is clean." Under the crooks of her arms are darker pools of sweat.

Without meaning to, I heave a sigh. “My lady, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not ashamed of *it*,” the Countess snaps, and then she closes her mouth and looks away, the profile of her face hidden by a curtain of black hair. “But it shouldn’t be seen.” She raises her head as I tug her sullied pillow off the bed, placing it outside her door before pulling it to.

I retrieve a fresh pillow from the wardrobe, and she continues, her words rolling over the pop of the fire. “If they know, they can use it against me. Something like this only comes from some ruined part of the soul.”

“Perhaps. I don’t know. None of us are without sin. They have no right to judge. I don’t.”

“They will.” As I rush out the door, the Countess asks, almost imperceptibly, “Where are you going?”

I stop and face her. “To the washroom. To find a cloth for your...” I circle my finger around my own mouth.

She doesn’t protest, so I take a candle off the nearest nightstand and find a cloth to bring back, dipping it into one of the many wooden basins in the washroom corner, full of water; I imagine it must take hours to heat them all to prepare the Romanesque bath. When I return to her room, I glide to the fire and hold the cloth over it, so it’s warm.

Once I’m satisfied, I sit by her, keeping my feet on the floor. I raise the cloth, and the Countess shakes her head.

With a pained grunt, Lady Báthory fully sits up, supporting herself with one arm. “I can do it myself.”

No, she’s not frightened. Only exhausted. And exhausting.

I can’t tell if it’s the deep shadows in stark chiaroscuro with the fire, but the darkness under her eyes is as intense as a third-day bruise.

She believes that this sickness is her fault, sprouted from original sin. Or a sin so grave, it afflicted her as a child and shamed her parents. Because a child is so young, and if they are so sin-ridden to grow diseased from it, surely they are a reservoir of their parents’ unspoken crimes against God.

So, she must’ve needed to, in time, become well. Or the illusion of well.

I raise my shoulders and harden my voice, trying to meet her energy. “Aren’t I here so you don’t need to do such things alone?”

“I’m not a child or a simple woman,” she grouses, being so very petulant and indignant.

I straighten my back, even if my constant malaise makes me feel small and liquid. “You are my lady, and I ask for your trust to let me do my duty. If not as your sweet maid, then as another proper lady who must continue to learn how to be responsible for those entrusted to my care."

As we share a gaze, the heat in my lungs scorches white.

I must be mad, speaking to a Báthory like this. Some lords or ladies might have a maid stripped naked and lashed or doused in icy water for talking back. She wouldn’t be reviled for striking me across the face, even if I’m of noble birth. If I were to tell Mother what she’d done, well, why did I speak out of turn and make myself a victim?

The Countess doesn’t want me to think she is weak, and if I tell her that she is strong, she’ll only suspect the opposite is so.

I want to say that it’s okay to be weak. In the grand scheme of God’s world and His miracles, we are all weak and only here for a brief time, and that’s okay. Moths destined for the flame.

Is that true? The strong eat the weak.

I can't imagine how tired I'd be if I wore her mask all day, but I suppose I do have my own masks.

One of her hands settles on the sheets beside my hip, reflexively grasping at them every now and then. Her chest rises and falls quickly with shallow breaths.

I'm tempted to take her hand in mine and try to calm her. Warm her skin. I don't. I keep still and wait for her permission for—something.

The Countess gives me a slight nod. "Get a new gown, then."

"I would first like to clean your face and replace the sheets. Is that all right?"

After I get the warm cloth and clean sheets, I'm surprised to see her sitting at her vanity. After I make the bed, the dirty sheets wadded on the floor, she sits back down where she was, and I join her.

Molding the damp cloth so it has a soft point, I dab at the river of yellowed spittle, her cheek and jaw reddening from the heat. I'm careful to keep the cloth between our skin. Under my hand, she is remarkably frozen, as if sculpted in ice. Her eyes don't burn; they're dark as wet ash. Hazy and exhausted.

Not once do either of us look away.

After, I place it outside for a maid to pick up. When I stand at my full height, I inhale deeply and decide whether I should go back in, suggest what my morals tell me I should do. What I would want someone to do if I were in her place.

When I had my night terrors and sleepwalking episodes, my parents had a maid trail me, but they learned to stop coming to my chambers. They learned that when a babe is in the crib, it is best not to respond to its cries, so their human sin wouldn't corrupt the child's natural equilibrium.

This is, was, is normal; to care for a babe, you may love it, but you mustn't spoil it with too much handling or coddling. Eventually, they wouldn't allow the maids to stay in bed with me, determined for me to learn how to control myself. Emotional incontinence, a priest once told me, was my enemy. So, I hardened, grew sullen, and that was wrong, too. I was expected to be stoic but not cold, affectionate but not loose.

Heading back inside and shutting the door behind me, settling my back on the surface, I ask Lady Báthory, "Do you want me to stay with you

tonight?”

The guard will return, eventually, but it’s normal for an attending maid to be in the same bed as her lady, if she commands it.

She is still sitting up, staring at the fire with the sheets wadded in her grip.

I expect her to refuse and can’t help as if I’ve done a great, perilous wrong. I’ve seen her sickness. To her, a weakness, a spiritual failing. I went and tapped Achilles on the heel. She’ll tell me to leave, and then we will prepare in complete silence in the morning as if this never happened.

Softly, Lady Báthory tells me, “Yes. Stay with me.” She doesn’t go to lie down, as if moving from her position will provoke her spasms again. She works her jaw.

I nod, saliva thick in my mouth. Unsure of how to proceed. I have had maids share a bed with me on bad nights, but I’ve never *been* the maid. Expected to perform as needed. As if I know what to do. I knew tonight, but perhaps the next time I won’t.

Reaching beside her with the hand I thought of holding, she folds back the top blanket and sheet, inviting me to join her.

Already dressed for bed, hands fidgeting at my collarbone, I amble away from the door and make my way to the other side of the bed, pressing an experimental knee to the side of the mattress. Splaying my fingers on the sheets, I slip into bed beside her, pulling the soft veils over me.

The Countess stays where she is, squeezing the flesh of her shoulder under the chemise, and I sit up, too. I wonder if she might cry, but she doesn’t. Her eyes are now dry but bright.

Anger. At herself, perhaps, for showing weakness to me.

I want to reassure her that I feel like I’ve been around sickness and malaise all my life, and that I don’t see her struggles as moral failings. They just are, like the sun rising and the sky being blue. If she were a bad person for her moments of poor health, she wouldn’t go to court and do her best to attend to the people on her land.

Indeed, I know that no lord or lady is without some oppression or suggested violence they use to intimidate their vassals and serfs, just as there are no kings or queens without moments of cruelty, even through inaction, but she does the best she can to be good. She doesn’t squander her

finances on hedonism and revel in sadism toward her subjects. A low threshold for “good,” but such is the way of things.

The door opens, and Zoé, not the guard, hurries in, balancing a small porcelain plate with a steaming cup. Her hair is tousled.

With a bow, she sets the tea on the Countess’ side of the bed and leaves quickly, shutting the door behind her. Lady Báthory breaks her spell and regards the sage tea. Without another look, her legs unfurl under the sheets, and she eases down on her back, before rolling to face away from me.

I haven’t shared a bed with anyone since my husband. The room is suffocatingly warm, sweat making my temple and underarms itch, but it’s better than the early morning chill when the fire dies. Lady Báthory doesn’t falter, doesn’t squirm or shuffle her feet into the mattress. But her breathing doesn’t deepen, and I can sense how tightly wound she is.

Pulling the sheets over my shoulders, I roll away from her, close my eyes, and murmur a prayer to Mother Mary.

Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

Amen.

EIGHT

2nd of October

Regardless of the excitement during the night, my sleep in Lady Báthory's bed is restful.

When I dream, I see a latticed window ringed with moonlight. Standing before it is a woman in a violet dress, its dark waves lapping on the stones and crimson rugs, layered like a mountain of tongues.

Pearls glisten like eyes, like little stars in the net that captures her lush hair of dark chestnut.

Looking over her shoulder, she looks at me and beams, as if I'm the only person who matters as I sit up in the bed, the sheets also a deep purple and shimmering wrongly, like water. She sweeps to my side and strokes the side of my face, eyes like glittering ice and yet a deep brown. Dark liqueur. My lips tingle as I lean to meet hers. She isn't the Countess; she is somehow younger and older.

The memory pools in my head when my eyes blearily open.

Sunlight creeps on to the stones. My muscles and spine aren't as dense as they once were. I'm not as overwhelmed by self-consciousness being in her bed as I thought I'd be. The liquid song of prayer eased me into a slumber that made me forget any woes. Hers. Mine.

Yet, one thing bothers me: I try to think of who the woman in my dream is; I don't recognize her, but the heat and pressure of her kiss—to my shame, heat flowers on my cheeks, and the space between my legs stirs. I close my eyes and try to bring myself to equilibrium. as rain softly kisses the castle.

For an hour, I lie there, my back to the Countess, listening to her deep, even breaths. Did my presence here help at all? Did it give her peace of mind? I wonder if she woke up once and saw me lying on the other side. What did she see? I can't imagine her feeling self-consciousness as potent as mine, despite her image being far more scrutinized.

Even facing away from her, I'm aware of her, as if she must see me right now. Thank goodness there's no dried spit in the corner of my mouth, only dream-grit in my eyes.

Once the Countess stirs and rises for the day, a chasm spreads between us. Our routine commences as usual, the last day scoured away as if it never happened. We don't speak of her episode.

Before I dress her, I see the bruises above her collarbone where she squeezed the skin through her chemise. A question about her wellbeing springs to my lips, but I chew it into pieces, as if speaking my concern will come across as doubting her resolve. I'm preparing her to look strong.

And we go on as usual. I dress her in crimson and gold, and I pick at a breakfast of bread, butter, sliced apricots, and wine. I grind the fruits into grains of sour sweetness. They are mostly bearable, except a metallic aftertaste that won't disappear no matter how much I swallow. I hope food will taste normal again one day. I would hate to think that I will dislike eating for the rest of my life.

As I politely attempt to eat, the Countess is drawn away. A maid comes to whisper in her ear, and she stands, going to the entrance arch where two noblewomen stand in dresses of satin and lace.

I recognize them from Mother's dinners. Lady Vago and Danos, who are closer to Lady Báthory's age. Vago, in powder-blue with her brown hair braided around her head. Violet-dressed Danos, with her hair, dark blonde like mine, plaited with turquoises down her back. Violet, like the smirking but hazy dream-woman, but she's not her. Nevertheless, I can't banish that moonlit bedroom from my mind.

The noblewomen have perhaps come to speak about some matter of import; I've heard that their lands, close to the Danube, have recently flooded and have been besieged by bandits and petty lords looking for uncertain boundaries to claim.

After speaking to the women in her usual tone of professionalism, there is more color in the Countess' cheeks and neck. Good. Her gauntness last night frightened me.

But when the two women look at me, a shadow passes over both of them, knowledge. Knowledge of me. I can't help but feel a grim satisfaction at having an impact.

Lady Vago snaps her gaze back at Countess Báthory, pretending I don't exist, but Danos offers a placid if perfunctory smile. Wariness and pity.

My dark pleasure dampens. Swallowing the fruit on my tongue, which has turned bitter, I look down at my plate. I don't even smile. Why try? I feel ill, and the front right of my head starts to throb. I've found in matters such as these, it's better to listen than to be heard. One can discover much by being a shadow on the wall. That makes being a pariah less daunting. Never before today have I been so committed to daintily cleaning off my plate, trying to savor the sourness that falls down my throat, swallowing a bit too much wine guiltily.

Lady Báthory's words of kind greeting, layered with fresh honey, are distant, and they fade. But all too soon, a shadow looms over me as a maid comes to take my plate. Once she leaves, the shadow remains on my other side. Steeling myself, I look up and meet Lady Danos' clear gray eyes.

"Hello, Lady Esterházy." She sits beside me, so close that I notice the dry foundation around her eyes and an undercurrent of vinegar. "I heard that you may be here."

I feel like there's still food in my throat. "Hello, Lady Danos. How are you doing?"

"Oh, well." She sighs through her nose. "My husband just left to patrol the partium." A slash of land between Eastern Hungary and Transylvania where the unhappy serfs pay double the taxes to both the Habsburg Empire and the Pasha of Buda. "And the babe has started to walk."

"That's lovely," I say, my smile aching.

"Is it? I fear that she might scale the walls like I would try to do before I flowered." Leaning close, Danos whispers mischievously, "Is it true you bit off a man's tongue? Whose was it?" Most would ask how my day was going first.

I cannot tell if I was already this stiff, so much so the chair must have looser bones. I can see the Countess still engaging with Vagos, and there's something to how the other woman brushes her fingers against the Countess' sleeve as she laughs that makes me unhappier.

Instead of telling Danos that, no, his tongue was still attached, I say, "I'm not sure what you mean. Where did you hear that?"

"Valéria"—Lady Vago— "was telling me you had an affair with a man, and you were too rough with him. But it's salacious nonsense, I'm sure."

“Yes, it is. I’m still mourning my lord husband.”

“That’s unfortunate. You have my condolences.” She brushes her hand along the side of mine. A not-unpleasant ripple ribbons down my spine. “Did you receive my gift?”

I did. A bouquet of perfumed flowers. “Yes, thank you for your kindness.”

“You must tell me, though, how you’ve had the good fortune to be Erzsébet’s handmaiden, and at your age, too! I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be. This castle is magnificent, and the view, when the hills bloom red.” She sighs dreamily. “And of course, Erzsébet can be such a thoughtful host. She thinks of details I always forget; she’s much stronger with figures.” Before I can answer, she continues breezily, “It sounds like a wonderful way to start over, for whatever reason.”

I admire how effortless her words come across. She’s being kind, and her beauty almost causes me to give her the benefit of the doubt just so I can be less guarded in her presence and continue to admire her, but I can’t help but sense that she’s searching for a tantalizing secret.

I wish that I could be free. I wouldn’t need to keep my distance. I could enjoy her company—or anyone’s company—without considering hidden motives. And I might not feel uncomfortable thinking about the Countess on familiar terms like her.

This must be what Lady Báthory often feels a thousandfold. When I sit with her to sift through letters, often, other lords and ladies are sweet, but they are the sweetest when they request loans.

“Thank you for your kind words,” I blurt out, nauseated. “I’m afraid that I don’t know what else to say.”

She rubs my arm above my elbow and smiles toothily. “Of course.”

The Countess doesn’t hold court. She decides that, in the midday light, now that the rain has passed and the sun is out, we will embroider by the solar’s large mosaic window. We sit beside each other in twin chairs, a gilded display table in front of us. A bottle of pálinka lounges by the window, but

Lady Báthory hasn’t partaken, of course. Perhaps that was always there, and I, too inside my own head, missed it.

Above our heads, dust soaks in the daylight. I’ve grown so used to the warmth settling in my bones that I’ve forgotten the chill on the late evening I first arrived here, that echo of foreboding.

Meanwhile, a young maid, her face dimpled and spattered with freckles, dusts the hearth. She struggles to reach the objects there, but I fear any acknowledgment will be seen as criticism.

After an hour, Erzsébet sets her work down and paces across the room, presumably to stretch her legs. I gaze at her work in envy. The most succulent poppy.

“You told me you weren’t skilled,” the Countess says. I keep acting as if I’m hard at work, that I didn’t start to drift off into dreams about running through the hills and discovering new places. Maybe the myths about fairy lands aren’t so childish.

The more I live the life I have, the more I think that it’s necessary to have these melancholy dreams for the momentary rush of joy.

“Are you about to tell me that I’m worse than you thought, my lady?” I ask dryly.

Though I’m not looking directly at her, I swear the curves of her lip twitch once. Humor. Or annoyance. Either are likely.

She inspects my work with hooded eyes. “No, your work is acceptable. I would only suggest that you slow down. It’ll lessen the gaps between stitches. And, here, look. If you are too forceful, the fabric will give way. The last thing you want is to warp it.”

What a shame it’d be to not embroider anymore, I want to say wryly, but I truly don’t mind it. I’ve been trying to emulate my mother, her fluid movements with the needle like the arc of a sword. “That’s funny. Mother would always say I never went swiftly enough.”

My eyes glide down her sleeves as she sets her work aside and places her hands on her lap, which makes it look like her fingers are submerged in a pool of blood.

“That is Izabella,” the Countess replies. “She always wants to be at the forefront of things. But we’re speaking about you.”

The maid’s hand knocks against a small porcelain vase, which tilts. She yelps as she catches it and straightens it. She freezes, not looking in our

direction, knowing our scrutiny must be pinned on her.

Scowling, Lady Báthory waves brusquely to the maid dusting her floral vase. “Go on, then, before you break something. We’ve seen enough of you.”

The girl, who must be no older than fourteen, takes her cloth off the vase like drawing away from a feral dog’s jowls. “Yes, my Countess. I’m sorry.” She bows her head and clasps her hands and the dirty cloth together, as if in prayer.

“You don’t need to be apologetic. You need to listen.” When the girl retreats, Lady Báthory’s eyes fall on me.

I should stay quiet. Like I would’ve before.

“My lady, I have an inquiry. Meant in good faith.”

She arches her brow. “Go on.”

“Must you speak coarsely to the maids? They’re only girls.” Despite my refusal to look away, blood drains from my face. She’s never once done wrong to me, and her words toward the maids, while curt, aren’t terrible. I know how I should act. How I should stay quiet. The maids aren’t my equals, and I’m not the Countess’ equal, no matter how many times I’ve seen her nude and how I wiped saliva from her face when she had an episode.

She hums. “Was I coarse? I don’t think so. I pay them good money to be competent. They must prove their aptitude.”

“I only.” Saliva collects in my mouth, and so I shut it to swallow. “I only don’t want to bother them.”

She stares. “It isn’t bothering them to tell them when to go and when to leave. If their services aren’t needed, they shouldn’t simply stand around. They have their duties, and we have ours.” She leans down, so I feel her breath on the side of my hair. “Please don’t tell me you eat so sparsely, so you won’t bother them. It only means they’ll need to scrub more off the plate.”

“No, that’s not it,” I argue.

She straightens. “I don’t reward foolishness. No one should. If I were a crueler mistress, I might’ve punished her with needles or a whip, but I won’t.”

“Needles,” I repeat, in shock that the thought came to her.

“Yes. That’s what my husband would’ve instructed me to do. He was taught to treat prisoners and deserters sharply, and when I was but a girl, his lady wife, he would regale me with details.”

I don’t gawk because I’m not surprised. Whatever I do feel, it isn’t my place to display outrage, especially to a widow remembering her dead husband. When I was an adolescent, Mother once had a maid who stole one of her necklaces stripped naked by the guards and forced to stand outside in the freezing December night. Though she didn’t die, four of her blackened toes needed to be amputated, and she was relieved of service without pay.

I want to say that I protested, or that I found out after the deed had been done. That I saw through the barbarism.

I saw the weeping, red-faced girl being dragged away by guards. I hadn’t spoken out then, only shaking my head at how stupid a fifteen-year-old girl, my age, no matter how poor, must be to try to steal from a proper lady. Regardless if she had starving baby siblings or a dying mother, the necklace was Mother’s, not hers, and that was that. Thieves don’t go to the Kingdom of God.

The Bible also says, *Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.* But the girl could no longer work after what happened.

Face hot, I wonder where she is now. If I’m able to run away with my allowance and find her, I could try to make things right. But for her sake or mine?

“We don’t ever truly teach with cruelty,” I say.

The Countess gives a brisk inhale through her nose. “That’s a good ideal, but it’s false. Our world is made from pain.”

“No, it’s made with God’s love, and He says that if someone steals from you that you should give them honest work to busy their hands. A second chance.”

“I have given her a second chance. More. I haven’t killed the girl. I’m not sure I agree with your metaphor. She’s no thief, by God, the girl has no boldness; she cries at the slightest provocation. And in the Bible, thieves are crucified.”

“By the Romans. Christ, though these thieves mocked him, found resolve and kinship with them because one of the men compelled him to

prove he was the Messiah."

"Yes," the Countess says, "Dismas. The Church sainted him, if you worship the saints."

I let her think in the crackle of the hearth and the whistle of the wind outside, her tantalizing liqueur eyes dark with contemplation. She rolls a needle between her fingers.

"I will relent from a sharper tone with the girls, but they come here to learn. Even Christ has limited patience, and even he complained that the Temple was turned into a den of robbers." The look she gives me is a mix of severity and softness, where her face is stiff but her eyes are open and honest. "We must only accept so many mistakes or trespasses until we correct them. As a widow, I've learned that when your lord husband dies, no matter if he rarely spent more than a third of his time at the estate, once he's gone, the crows converge. This is my estate, but they saw it as my husband's and then free land to set up their own structures and businesses."

"Until you went after them," I mutter with a ghost of a smile.

"*Yes.*" With an abrupt wave of her hand, the Countess says the word with enthusiasm, as if glad that she's speaking to someone who won't dismiss her as an unpleasant, uncompromising bitch. "They think that they can pick away at a mourning woman who will only try to appease them or avoid any impolite conflict."

"Yes." My jaw hardens. "I know."

"And so, if we just deal with crows," she continues with a confident air, as she's hit her stride, "we must be the wolves at our borders. With the politics swarming around us, we cannot rely even on our closest allies to protect us and our claims, only our own steel determination."

It sounds like a lonely existence, but it's true.

"But there's a difference between established lords scavenging for land and an insecure, poor maid," I point out. "I appreciate that you listen to me, my lady."

She stands and smooths out her dress. "Come, the day is fair. Walk with me."

With a flushed bow of my head, I do.

NINE

The Countess is right about the day. Though the post-storm wind chills the grounds, scattered white clouds dapple the potent blue sky. When we pass the stables, and I avoid rain puddles, I catch a whiff of horse dirt and see a glimpse of the hostler shoveling out hay.

I feel alive. I am alive.

We saunter down a winding stone path and pass spiraling arrangements of red roses and yellow peonies and wine-vermillion carnations. I lean and let my fingertips caress the petals. A gentle breeze grazes through my hair. While the day is bright, we are beneath the shadows of the castle walls.

A fluffy white dog runs up to us, and I bend to rub between his silky ears as he pants and wags his tail before bounding off.

As I inhale the rose-musk and carnation-spice, I'm all too aware of the Countess watching me through the corner of her eye. She walks with her hands clasped under her breast. As we departed from the castle, maids bowed as she passed, some making frantic fish-gulp motions with their throats.

The Countess says in her contralto husk, "How are your studies of language coming along? When I have the time, I will tutor you myself in German. What languages do you know?"

"Hungarian," I answer jokingly.

"Ah. What a surprise." Despite the jest, her mouth remains flat.

"I know," I reply, "I continue to be a novice. I've been working to improve on it." Noémie, Noémie, you must bite your own tongue now. You must never be too comfortable with anyone, especially not her.

Wary of stopping on a sardonic note, I add, "I also know, Latin, Greek, and French."

"Interesting," the Countess states. I try to read her voice and find nothing.

Hands primly before me, I say, “Yes. My mother is quite fond of their poetry, the French, and reading their accounts of the lives of saints.”

“Many nobles are. Enamored by France, that is That explains your name,” the Countess replies, neutrally enough.

“My name,” I repeat dully. We haven’t walked far, but already I feel like retiring to bed. My own bed, of course.

“A pretty one, to be sure.”

My face flushes. I suppose that I’ve never thought much of it either way.

I clear my throat when it threatens to close. “It is a variant of a woman’s name in the Bible, the mother of Ruth’s dead husband.”

“The widow.”

“Yes, they were both widows, Ruth and Naomi, but they stayed together.” Two women running from their old lives, which were once prosperous. “You have a saint’s name.”

Saint Erzsébet, princess of Hungary. Married at fourteen, widowed at twenty, dead at twenty-four. I always thought she was lucky to die so young. If only death claimed me at that age. Then, I wouldn't have experienced the worst night of my life.

Most days, those thoughts don’t eat me alive. Other times, they remain more persistent. So does the guilt. I have a good life. Even if I were to marry Lord Silvas, wouldn’t that be a better alternative than many have?

I feel alive, and yet, death is never far behind.

“Yes. It’s not as rare to hear a French name here as it once was,” Lady Báthory says.

Despite everything, I find myself smiling.

Speaking of the French, I retort, “It’s rare to find someone who is a practicing Protestant, particularly a sect created by a Frenchman.” As soon as the last word escapes my mouth, I cast down my gaze, looking at my pale fingers against the green satin.

Lady Báthory hums. “I see. That’s true. What do you want to ask me about?”

We haven’t known each other for long, and yet she intuits so much. As a lady who manages her own court, I imagine she’s accustomed to reading beneath surface intentions. When she’s pinched her nose and, over the crackling fire and after the rhythmic scratch of her quill pen, read letters

aloud to me, she's said, exasperated, "Never trust anyone's word when they refer to you as fair or their dear."

"Unless he's your lord husband," I replied lightly.

She'd glanced at me wearily. "Not even then."

"Nothing," I say, keeping my chin down, pretending to be distracted by a particularly erubescent commingling of poppies.

"Look at me." She stops to face me, and I do look at her. Her inscrutable, flinty eyes bear into me, her stare not averting once. "You could do almost anything here, so long as you don't try to shame me, but don't lie to me, ever. It shames *you*."

A fire twists in my chest. I'm heartened by the fact that, even as she casts a long shadow on the path, mine is longer and falls on her.

I have many questions about her Calvinism. "Don't you believe that, first and foremost, the Kingdom of God is ready for anyone through belief alone? That no rituals mean anything, not even baptisms?"

With her usual acuity, she responds swiftly, "I believe that Christ's sacrifice is the pinnacle of grace toward humanity, and it would be hubris to think any of us can aspire to that, saint or otherwise. There is only one Creator of miracles. Only one Lord who determines whether we've been saved. That's all. Nothing any of us do can alter our paths. No person can save themselves if God doesn't make it so. Just like no wafers or indulgences change what the Bible says. Holy water cannot save us if God decides we are unworthy."

"Mark 7:23. We are all defiled by evil. If men are depraved as our root nature, perhaps we should be more lenient. After all, no one can help the innate sinfulness of humanity. Those who are good will be rewarded in the afterlife, and those who aren't will be punished."

Her next words are biting. "You don't believe that."

I don't. Now, I don't see her beliefs as illogical. If God is a being outside our conceptions of time, power, and knowledge, He must already know all our fates; He wouldn't need to wait for us to decide whether to be good or evil. No human should be able to save or damn themselves if God already determines they're chosen or fallen.

Yet, He knows our hearts, and we cannot fathom our own fates. So, we must strive to decide to be good. And perhaps, with how strange and

unknowable the universe is, there is a paradox: God plans that we decide our own fates.

I tell her, “I can’t believe that Christ would die and show us the cruel price of his rebellion and love, just for us to not fight to make our own choices to be good. Or that he wouldn’t share his own beautiful gifts with us. After all, he was half a man, born from an immaculate mortal woman. If you believe in no other saints, we must agree that Mother Mary was unique, to be a woman to give birth without a man because the Lord deemed her worthy above anyone else.”

We may be born sinners, but we are also made in God’s image; if we were so lowly, we might not go to Paradise at all.

The Countess argues, her voice bearing a rough edge that sends goosebumps down my skin, “There’s no such thing as an immaculate person. We all are born of sin, even Mary. The only reason her evils didn’t pass to him is because only the lord of the house can pass sins to his children. And once Christ died and cleansed himself of his humanity, she was no longer his mother.”

“Of course she was,” I blurt out, aghast that anyone would disrespect the mother of Christ.

“Don’t misunderstand me. She was a good woman. Only the most honorable woman would have spoken to the angels and conceived the Lord. But she wasn’t without sin. We all have evil in us. All those who go to Heaven were still, on Earth, sinners. That includes her, and that includes us.”

My hands curl into fists at my side. Feeling a little feral, I turn and go to rip a poppy out of the ground, so I may examine its brazen circumference of scarlet. But in my haste, I miscalculate and instead grasp a rose with biting thorns. “Do you think you’re one of those ones chosen for salvation?” I squeeze them stem more, even as I feel it dig into my palm, and I feel a trickle of blood.

“It’s a fruitless thing to think about,” the Countess murmurs in that exasperated, world-tired way of hers. “No one can know, until we die.”

I raise the flower close to my lips. “God will choose when it’s time. Our stories aren’t done.”

“He’s already chosen. The Lord doesn’t need to abide by our linear time.”

I shake my head. “My point was that, if you believe that we are all sinful at our core, that we’re made for such, you shouldn’t judge, say, a young maid for faltering every now and again. She is only acting as she knows, our base nature.”

Heatedly, the Countess replies, “We learn the ways of Christ to better ourselves, rise above it all.”

“What is the meaning of that if our fates are already determined?”

“If God knows all, controls all, sees all, that is the most logical conclusion. Nothing is beyond His knowledge, so everything is planned.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Why not do all the atrocities in the world if it doesn’t matter?”

When I turn to see her out of the edge of my vision, I see her pressing a hand against her dress, her hip. I’ve seen her grunt and lean over her letter-writing desk. No matter what I did to try to help, she told me to stay where I was.

At the vanity, after responding to written petitions, she rubs willow and rue lotion between her fingers. I’ve seen the statuesque old woman who’s brought it to her, the woman who I’ve learned is named Anna Darvulia.

The Countess states, “It isn’t our place to give meaning. If it exists, God has determined it. We may discover it, perhaps, and if it’s unknowable to the simple human mind, that’s by design.”

“But it is our place to discover it, if God doesn’t tell us in His clandestine wisdom.”

“We—” She stops. “What have you done?” Rustling to my side, the Countess pries open my palm and, as the rose falls, her dark eyes widen at the smear of blood the thorns have left.

“Dear God,” the Countess rasps, and for a second I don’t think of her as my lady or the proud descendant of dragons. As her long, precise fingers drape over my knuckles, and she inspects my wound, I think to myself, *Erzsébet*.

Erzsébet, but no saint. I could still worship her.

“It’s nothing,” I mutter. “I’ve suffered far worse than this. Thorns have a way of finding me.”

“We must go back and tend to this.”

“We?”

She regards me flatly. “Certainly, I wouldn’t be able to effectively heal your hand if you aren’t present.”

I resist the urge to give some little tic of annoyance. “My lady, you don’t need to tend to the injuries I’ve foolishly brought on myself. It would be...” Indecent.

“Do you think I haven’t seen blood in my lifetime?”

That ends my protests.

The Countess says archly, “I know quite a bit more than how to write letters to convince a man to cease his trespasses or his overindulgence of wine. I certainly can’t have my closest handmaiden getting blood all over my clothes.”

No need to overthink her words, dear Noémie. Naturally, I’m her closest handmaiden, her lady-in-waiting.

The other one died.

In the warm solar, inviting after the coolness outside, I’m stunned when, in a pocket of her slanted desk, the Countess retrieves a glass bowl of a pungent but sweet poultice. It’s thick, yellow, and sticky.

“Herbs and honey,” she explains. “Normally, I use it when the paper cuts my fingers open.”

“Thank you,” I say, a little skeptical that honey has healing properties. Nevertheless, I smear it on my “wound.” “But it’s really not too awful.”

She dramatically plops into her chair by the fire and leans her elbow on the armrest. “You were bleeding.”

“Yes, but even the most shallow wounds in the hand bleed profusely. I should know after all the pin pricks when I embroider.”

With a short hum, she joins her hands together loosely, one atop the other. “You must be careful with your hands. When you cut that part of the body, you have venous bleeding, steady bleeding. That’s because you have many tiny capillaries and nerves in your hands. Aristotle believed that nerves are all directly connected to the heart. More capillaries, more nerves, more blood.”

“That does make sense,” I reply, embarrassed at my lack of knowledge of the body. I can do figures and mathematics well, but most of the sciences elude me.

Staring at myself and her in the mirrors, her mirrors, I lift my hand and inspect the viscous ointment mingled with my thin pink injury, which despite its smallness continues to trickle.

It all seems so giddy and ghoulish to imagine what must lie beneath my skin.

“I don’t see my nerves,” I mutter, only seeing the faint blue vein (artery?) on the inside of my arm.

“No one can,” she says behind me, her stare both burning my face and the crown of my head.

“How do you know that they’re there?”

“The same as how we believe in the existence of the immortal soul. We feel.”

“I’m not sure I can separate the feelings of the soul and the idea of physical nerves that are still somehow invisible. Are they one and the same?”

“I don’t believe so. Perhaps in time, we might discover the organization and appearance of nerves, but that will likely be long past our lifetimes.”

The thought makes me sad to consider all the discoveries that I won’t live to see. A somberness takes root in me.

Before I can become too submerged in my sullenness, the Countess tells me, “I see you sometimes when you go out into these hills alone.”

I face the Countess. “You do?”

“Out the window, for only a second.”

I sit beside her in another chair. She is radiant in the firelight. “For only a second? Am I that quick to move out of view?”

“I suspect you wouldn’t want me to watch you for hours.”

I admit, “I always feel watched here.”

“Though I don’t keep my entourage overly large, I’m sure there is always someone passing by windows. You see them, and they see you.”

Her words are true enough, but I can’t explain to her this creeping, eerie itch at the base of my neck when I’m alone. Even in broad daylight.

She says, “Even in the daytime, I never go out without an entourage or some sort of company. It might be best to take a maid with you. But that

wasn’t why I brought it up. I wanted to ask out of curiosity: What do you do out there alone?”

“I sit.” Sometimes, though I try to be careful of dew and grass stains. “And think.”

“What do you think about?”

I roll back the days in my head, like the wind combs back the shuddering wheat. Swaying weeds and marsh marigolds. My legs folded under me, my hands idle on where my dress pools over my inner thighs. Watching the mounds of earth, as they change every day from green to blood-red and sun-gold. All that washes over me is longing; the beauty makes me sad.

“I don’t remember. Nothing substantial.” The truth. Only when I see the world around me does it feel like it isn’t against me. The grass, the leaves, the sun, they don’t conspire against me.

“You were smiling, just then.”

I look down at my hand. The bleeding has stopped. “Oh.”

Contemplatively, the Countess says, “I've never seen you smile before.”

I’ve never seen her smile either. I swallow the lump in my throat. “Do you want me to do it more?”

Instead of answering, the Countess posits another question. “How are you faring here?”

I pause, trying to determine why she’d ask that now. “I’m faring well. I am very grateful for my station.”

“Hm,” she replies, and I run my words over in my head. I cannot see where I’ve gone wrong. Perhaps the Tower of Babel’s destruction didn’t only create different languages of speaking; it created different languages of being. No matter what, no matter what I say, I am alien to all others. The loneliest syntax in the world. “You’ve barely eaten for the past week. I think you drink more wine than you eat food, and even then, you barely have that. It’s no wonder that you often look debilitated. Is something on your mind? Or, is there something else burdening you?”

Despite the fire, I go cold.

She must know the answer. I’ve felt her gaze on me these last few hours, and since the start, she’s watched me, as I watch her, throughout the day.

And all the experiences I’ve had—most of them—she’s likely experienced, too. Many times. Most of her living children are grown, but I

have seen her two teenage daughters here at the castle.

Don't lie to me.

This might very well be a test, and I steel myself against that grim mire in my mind, the one that tells me that, no matter what, I'll fail.

I start, "My appetite has been poor." It isn't false.

"Interesting. Are you having your flux?" She certainly never minces words.

"I haven't had my flux in a two months." I can't say that I've mourned its absence; when I have my cycles, they last seven to nine days, and I bleed and cramp profusely. And the space before my navel aches days before and days after. It was easy to determine when something was different because it often feels like all I do is prepare to bleed, and then bleed.

The look the Countess gives me is pointed; I can feel its edge from across the room. "How far along are you?"

"Two months," I reply.

"How do you know? Is there anything else, any other symptoms?" How refreshing it is. I had feared that she'd be angry with me that I had fallen pregnant.

I fumble with St. Saturnina at my neck with my wounded hand, until I feel the bloody smear against the silver, as I grip too hard and my wound reopens. "I suppose it's not very different from how you know. But I can feel it." I think I felt it when I conceived, if that's even possible. A sensation in that space less than a pinch and more than a flutter.

A fear taking form, the promise of more grief.

"Your husband's child." A questioning unquestion.

"Yes." Not a lie. Everything that happened after, I was already pregnant.

My baby, I'd cried to Lord Silvas because if he didn't care for my pain, surely he might care for an unborn soul. *My baby.*

God. Two months. It feels like two days. Two-hundred years.

Crossing one of her wrists over the other in her lap, the Countess asks, "Does your mother know about this?" All this time, I try to read her stony expression. She blinks once, but that's all.

Feeling a little dizzy, I shake my head. "Will you tell her?" I swallow thickly when my voice cracks.

The line of her mouth darkens. "No. It isn't my business to do so. Do you want the child?"

A direct question. Not as difficult as it seems at first. What makes it hard is what I know I should say in contrast to my heart and mind.

Miklos was my husband, and he's dead.

Most would be overjoyed to have the chance to carry on a piece of their spouse. He was never cruel to me, after all.

I meter my voice carefully. "It might be best to have it, especially as an heir to carry on my family's wealth."

She cocks her head to the side. Oh no, I know that gesture. "Perhaps, though a new husband may resent any child from a previous marriage. But that isn't the question."

Do I want a child? Odd question. Like asking if I ever wanted to menstruate. Or if I ever wanted to marry. Or if I had a choice in believing in God.

"We are born for certain destinies," I mutter, unsure if she can hear me over the fire.

"Ah," she says, straightening in her seat. "I may make a Calvinist of you yet."

"I don't have much time left."

"I'm not sure I grasp your meaning."

"I'm not sure I do either."

I may not even be thirty yet, but most women die before they are forty; Mother and Lady Báthory are exceptions. The most common manner to die is childbirth, and the sooner I crawl to thirty without having a child, a child who makes it past infancy unlike...the higher the perils of my pregnancies.

As soon as I married Miklos at fifteen, the specter of death started following me ever closer. How morbid for a lady to think like that, to associate the honor of giving life with death when I should say that, of course, a good mother would willingly die for her child. It's godly and pure. A sacrifice.

My life, then as an adolescent, could very well have been half over. Now, I wait for one bad meal to give me typhoid fever. Or for the Black Death to come to Hungary. Or to carry a child to term, only to almost die like...this child might...

Mariska...

I should be selfless. I should think that no matter what, I'd die to give birth to this child. Miklos' child. He deserves a legacy, doesn't he, and isn't

that more important than my selfish earthly life? And who knows, maybe the Countess is right, and I'm bound for Heaven or Hell no matter what I do.

"No," I tell Lady Báthory, and though I clamp my mouth shut, it's as if I've expelled a loud gasp, relieved myself of a breath long held inside me. I hate that my eyes burn and how the glow of the flames doesn't help, but I don't dare look away from the Countess. "I'm scared. Neither Mother nor I have ever had luck with children." I fear that she might convince me that I must have the child, even though logically, of course, I must give birth.

"That's true, but your mother had you."

My laugh is bitter. "As I said."

Her face softens. "I know that a mother might not always know how to live to the image of who she should be, but she was overjoyed when you lived."

It must certainly be nice to know what it's like to birth a living child, to feel them wriggle as they cry.

Bitter, that tastes bitter as opium.

The last time. The blood. The exhaustion. And for nothing, except whispers and drawn faces whenever I entered a room.

The Countess tells me, leaning forward, "Should you not want the child, Anna Darvulia will have a solution, then. She and her companions."

"They will?" I feared anyone else knowing of my state, especially Darvulia, a stranger, who assists Dorkó with the maids' sleeping arrangements. The former wetnurse to Lady Báthory's older children.

"Yes, this isn't the first time a maid has fallen with child."

Word might spread to the servants and then outward. The impudent widow, now recklessly with issue. Or, worse, the heartless woman who doesn't want the only memory of her deceased husband. I shouldn't have ever cried out to Lord Silvas about the child, not that he seemed to have heard me before I bit him.

I run my hands down my face. I mustn't weep. "Is it so simple, my lady?"

"Dorkó doesn't only manage the maids' chores. I acquired her services years ago. And Darvulia taught me to take herbal baths for my condition. It was better than sitting in the closet."

I stare in horror. “Dear God. They put you in the closet? To punish you?”

“No. It was for—the dark wouldn’t give me convulsions like the light would.”

“Is that why you bathe so often?” I bathe often. But. Not quite as much as her. “To calm your body?”

“I didn’t know you were curious about my bathing habits. But yes. Or,” she continues, releasing a sigh through her nose, “my parents would try to have the guards hold me down, to try and calm me. I prefer the alternative.” I remember the guard remaining outside her room and trying to rouse her, perhaps thinking she was having a violent night terror.

“I imagine that wasn’t very calming,” I say. The last comfort I’d want when losing control of my body is a mass of men pinning me to the ground.

She stares, and then does something like a huff, the edges of her mouth curling. I might’ve made her laugh. “As I said, if you wish, Darvulia can assist you. Ilona Jo and Dorkó, too.”

What would she think of me? Not here for two weeks, a supposed woman of refinement, and I must ask her to relieve me of issue.

“Will you be there?” I ask her.

She seems to deepen into her own chair. “I could, though it will need to be in the evening. Unfortunately, I have matters to attend to. No doubt someone will need my attention. But if I can’t be, if you’d rather I not see, I will come after.”

I likely should wait until night to take whatever Darvulia will give me.

“I fear that there’s a suitor I have, and though he’s hurt me, and he knows about the child, I will still have to marry him.”

She knows who it is. There’s no reason to be coy. But I can’t stay strong and say his name.

“Does this gentleman still seek to marry you?” she asks lowly.

“I think so.” If not out of lust, then out of spite, like an owner thirsting to break his disagreeable horse.

No, I know he will. For Mother and me, it’s the safest manner to repair all this. And Mother will choose our social safety above all else.

“Lord Silvas came into your chambers, assaulted you, and you bit him.”

“Yes.”

A storm in her dark eyes. “He’s done. I’ll have the Captain and a few of his men steal him away while he’s out whoring and have him gelded.”

Startled, I ask, “What of the law, the church?”

Coolly, the Countess steeples her fingers. “They cannot criticize what they never see.” I swallow thickly, unsure what would happen to Silvas after.

Yet, the flutter in my stomach isn’t unpleasant.

But I must be good. Be good, not feel good.

I start, “Please don’t. He...”

“What is it?”

“I despise him, and I don’t want to do it, but marrying him is the only salvageable route for my reputation.”

Roughly, she replies, “That’s not true. There are other lords, many with better means than he. And perhaps there’s another place you can go.”

“Where?”

“Wherever you wish to go. Certainly, it’d be no expense to me.”

It’s becoming harder to keep her intense gaze. My eyes sting. “Why would you help me?”

“It’s my duty. Anyone can come to me and seek recompense for their wrongs. You are no different. If you ever want me to deal with this, we will sort the matter out. I’ll protect you.”

I don’t know what to say, my throat constricting. “Thank you. I suppose I should forgive Lord Silvas. It’s in God’s nature to forgive, isn’t it?”

“Damn forgiveness,” the Countess says, final. A shiver convulses down my spine. “You did the right thing.” I don’t remember her standing, but she’s out of her chair, a striking shadow by the fire.

“Did I?” I whisper, and before I know how to react, she comes before me, and I think she might give me a handkerchief because I’ve started to cry.

Instead, to my shock, her burning flower scent overwhelms me when she cups my cheeks in both hands, rubbing away a tear with her thumb. I feel her smooth rings dimple my skin.

“Yes, you did,” she murmurs, stroking my tears away. I sit there and let myself cry for a few minutes, both uncertain of and relishing the feeling of a physical touch that doesn’t hurt. She holds my chin and doesn’t let go—God, has anyone ever done that?

After my tears slow, I'm embarrassed by my face, which I cannot see, but I feel the drying tears and mucus, taste the salt of them pooling between my cracked lips.

I tell her, trying to change the subject from my duress, "I've never spoken to Darvulia and Ilona Jo."

"Ilona Jo spends her time with my daughters, Orsik and Katherine."

"Ah, yes, I remember."

The Countess lets go of my damp, disgusting face, and my stomach cramps at the loss. She hands me a cloth handkerchief, embroidered with poppies. "If you are afraid, you don't need to do this."

"Of course I'm afraid." I wipe at my face.

"That's normal, but compared to childbirth, this will be less perilous."

"I know. I've given birth before, but my girl did not live."

Something new shines in her eyes, an emotion I never witnessed even when she bends by her desk. Pain. "I understand."

I believe her. The death of a child is common.

Common, what a horrible word for that heartache that I can't describe in whole, only in pieces.

Anger at myself for failing to have a healthy child. At everyone else for not truly understanding. At God for allowing this to happen while murderers roam the earth.

Self-loathing because of my broken body.

Ambivalence because my stillborn daughter was mine, should be alive, but I still don't know what it'd be like to be a mother.

Relief, a sick relief I hate myself for having, that despite my sorrow and tears that I haven't passed my ruin and sin to someone else, who'd surely suffer because of my own failings I can't prevent because I'm human.

Mothers aren't supposed to think like that, I tell myself. I'm broken. There should be no conciliation, no life after this. I've failed what I was born to do. Modesty. Humility. Affection. Sacrifice.

Mother Mary, guide me. I have no right to my own grief.

"I know it'd make more sense for me to want to abandon the child if it were the man who violated me. Rather than my dead husband." I'm not sure whether I want her to validate what I've said, tell me I'm a monster.

The Countess says, expression inscrutable, "You don't need to justify yourself to me. Our fates will be what they will be. Now, after what you've

suffered, you must worry about giving yourself the life you want. But you don’t necessarily have to worry alone. And you don’t need to decide your entire life today.”

“I...yes.” I raise my hands to my cheeks, still feeling the Countess’ warmth.

TEN

3rd of October, Night

Late in the evening, the moon outside rendering the mirror in my room opalescent, I receive Dorkó. She greets me with a quick bow and her usual unsmiling demeanor. She's dressed in a muted red dress when she guides me to the washroom, which like the Countess' boasts a large pool in the tiles and a sizable tub. I'm wearing a simple chemise that will likely be ruined.

As I sit on a gold-crusted stool by a basin, I watch three old women, the nagymamák, wave and sigh at one another after they huddle over a counter with their bowls and vials. I think when I envisioned these three folk-women, these three weird sisters, I imagined a darker room with a cauldron belching up purple mist and hundreds of jars of small animal bones. They don't even have a massive spell tome.

All things considered, I'm underwhelmed in my overwhelmed state. They do have pestles they grind and scrape into their mortars of herbs, however.

Indeed, witches might be stoned in the Bible, but I can't deny being a girl and taking pots from the kitchen and throwing in petals, sticks, grass, small bones I found with the hopes of weaving charms. As a girl fretting about taking up too much space and having my hands and knees smacked, power from nothing sounded appealing. Mother had sighed and said that all girls have a witch phase, like she had herself, but they come to submit to God eventually.

Yet, she asked a folk-woman to help me once. Before I was married, I had a month of illness: coughing; sore chest. I don't know what was wrong, and so soon after Aba's death, Mother feared the Black Death had finally come to Hungary and targeted her only child. No matter my lack of swelling and pustules, she would take my hand into hers, hand soft from her lotion, crafted from crushed amethysts.

The memory is almost pleasant and smells like medicine.

“Dear God, Dorkó,” tall and pale-eyed Anna Darvulia says, her hair pinned in a braided spiral around her head. “Do you think you’ve added enough opium?”

“Shut up, Anna,” answers Dorkó.

“Well, if we want the poor woman to fall through the floor...”

Ilona Jo gesticulates in the air. “By Mary’s tit, it’s fine, but you really should add more milk for strength.” Her wild, loose hair seems to have a life of its own. It looks like mine when it’s undone, like now. A few of my own dark blonde curls hang in my vision like briars.

Ilona Jo is the largest woman of the three and also the tallest, and she has a heavy bosom beneath her white dress with a blood-red stripe down the middle and pink roses around the skirt. She looks at me with sharp brown eyes that soften. “Don’t take this impolitely, dear, but you look very weak.”

I give her a wan smile. “No apologies needed. I *feel* weak.”

The loose-haired woman returns my smile with a kindness that feels genuine, especially with her air giving off a mirth like everything is a secret joke.

Hugging my arms over myself, I watch these three old women conversing among themselves, gray heads bowed toward one another, as they make the abortifacient. Their reflections even seem to play off one another, as light as the candelabra and lanterns giving the room a comfortable glow.

I look for Lady Báthory at the closed door, and I feel pathetic. My breath hitches as I wait for a knock, as if she’d knock! She has her duties, her court to hold and letters to write about fiscal matters. It’s going into night now, but there’s no reason she should go straight from her business to see how I’m doing.

The Countess will come sometime in the night. She said she would.

Desperately, I believe her.

The concoction Ilona Jo shows me is made of black hellebore, tansy, and savin juniper boiled together and mixed into kumis, mare’s milk, with some opium added in, too. She lists all of these easily. The mostly liquid mixture is gray-blue with yellow smiles poking out of the foam.

They give me the entire mortar of the stuff, and when I resolve to be strong and swallow it whole, I tip it against my lips. My entire face shrivels.

Ilona Jo tsks when she takes the bowl away from me. “I know, I know. It’s terrible.” As if she’s tasted it before. She holds out her hands to me. “Come, dear.”

Not feeling a change in my body, I walk close to the bath and sit on a birthing chair settled above a large, ornate, golden-flowered chamber pot. In the corner, Dorkó warms water in large pots on the stove. The hot steam in the room makes me flush, and I take a deep breath and hold it until my lungs ache.

“Hot water will help cleanse and draw the substances out,” Ilona Jo breezily explains.

“Substances,” I repeat dully, suddenly very tired.

“We must wait until you’ve started.”

Standing at my side, Darvulia finishes with crossed arms, “Unless you want to sit in cold water.”

I chew on my lip, which earns me from Ilona Jo: “Remember to breathe, pretty one.”

I reply, “I am breathing.”

At the stove, Dorkó says with her usual tact, “The Countess speaks very fondly of you. I would hate it if you died and disappointed her.”

Anna Darvulia sniffs and says to her companion with a crackling voice, “Must you?”

Dorkó replies plainly. “I am trained to heal the body, not sweeten the head with lies.”

“She speaks fondly of me?” I ask.

Ilona Jo tells me gently, “She says that you are intelligent and give her good company. Margit was no fool, but she rarely said much.”

“Margit. That was her name, the old handmaiden?”

Ilona Jo sobers. “Yes. She was quite young.”

I grip the armrests, hot and unable to stop the tight sensation in my throat. “She was killed by whoever killed the other women.”

Ilona Jo looks up, and though I’ve lowered my head, I know the three women are exchanging a look.

Darvulia says, “I didn’t know you knew about that.”

“There are many dark spirits,” Ilona Jo murmurs.

“In the woods?” I prompt.

“Everywhere,” says Ilona Jo. “We would be fools to think that walls can keep us safe. It’s why the insides are lined with animal bones, right behind the stones. They ward off anything malevolent that might come in through the windows and chimneys.”

I’m not certain the folk charms have worked, but a part of me finds comfort in her reassuring tone.

Darvulia’s tone is clipped. “Let us not focus on such dour subjects.”

I ask Ilona Jo, raising my head to meet her eyes, “You truly think she and the others were killed by a dark spirit?”

Seriously, she explains, “I’ve seen it, the woman, like the one in stories of old.” A splash beside me.

“A woman? Like those stories of the Beautiful Lady.” The Fairy Queen who lures children to the forest, so the fairies will steal them and replace them with changelings. Children who are different, and therefore spoiled. Corrupted.

“She might’ve once been a beauty, but now her nature is more like that of a feral animal, a wolf gone mad. Her mouth and throat were black with dried blood. There’s a sad loneliness to her.”

Behind me, Dorkó makes a rough noise. “She killed those poor women.”

Already, I’m adjusting to the killer, the monster, being she. Not he. Not it.

Ilona Jo says, “Yes, but if she’s a being from nature, or even if she’s from the preternatural world of the fairies, they may have their tricks, but there are ways to appease them. They are not simply beasts.”

Dorkó argues, “You said it yourself. She was like an animal.”

A tense silence follows, so I ask, “How did my lady find three adept folk-women in her service?”

Darvulia, who looks to be the oldest, replies archly, “We were needed. As wet nurses and midwives, and then to help girls in the castle. And to raise the Countess’ children.”

Too aware of the taut space below my navel, I press, “And the Countess? You helped her falling sickness.”

“When you struggle with your health, and the priests and proper, studied male physicians dismiss your issues as hysteria or a moral failing, you find other methods. We are the other methods, using natural sciences that we know have made a difference for hundreds of years, but they’re seen as

inferior to the realm of clinical rationalism in Paris and Florence. Our lady may covet the sciences, but she also knows not to limit her solutions."

"I, I see," I stumble on my words as a sharp cramp, first like pre-menstruation, digs below my navel. What starts as a trickle inside my thigh, a light vaginal discharge I've known since I gave birth, becomes a hot flood.

I suck in a breath, but it makes the pain worse. I cry out, the spasms as intense as when I went into labor.

Darvulia orders, "Spread your legs farther."

I listen, and one of them, Ilona Jo, dabs a cold washcloth to my temple; I faintly smell mildew. Need a clean cloth to wipe myself between my legs, scrub myself raw.

However long I sit there, my backside aches, and I almost collapse from the seat in exhaustion. My body, even in my stance, starts to crumple, and I want this to be over already. Ilona Jo and Darvulia grasp my shoulders and help me upright.

As I feel as if I'm being ripped in twain between my legs, I try to be brave. I wait as long as I can until I whisper reedily, "Please, please, the bath."

I wobble up and slip, the ball of my foot knocking against the heavy pot and throbbing. Ilona Jo pulls me to her. If she didn't catch me, I would've doubled over or stumbled on the tiles, which are more slippery than I thought. She moves to my side and grips my shoulder, helping me to the tub as Dorkó pours another pot into the tub.

My hands are still fisted in my raised skirts, exposing my pubis, and I catch a glimpse of the red on my thighs. I expected spurts, a gush, but in parts the oozing bloody discharge is dark black, brown, and clotted like slimy blackberry treacle.

Bile rises in my throat. I think that if I need to climb into the tub on my own, I'll die.

Both Ilona Jo and Darvulia help me into the steaming bath, as I gasp and sob, my back collision painfully into the copper-tub.

Dorkó, while I was talking to Darvulia, poured water so the tub is about a fifth of the way full. My chemise sticks to my skin from blood and sweat. Bathtubs back then were circular, not oblong, so I'm able to open my legs.

Ilona Jo leans beside my elbow and pats my shoulder. “Breathe. This will pass. You’re doing so well.”

“More,” I gasp. “I need more. Laudanum, poppy tea, anything.” I grind my teeth, and the breath I pull through my nose stings my lungs, everything tight and pinched inside me.

“Any more of the opium will kill you.” After Darvulia fishes into her apron and hands something to her, Ilona Jo leans beside my elbow. “Here, chew on this.” Thin yellow leaves are pinched between her fingers.

“What is this?” Shakily, acting on impulse, I press my hand on the top of hers, feeling the hills of her knuckles and the rivers of her varicose veins.

“Honeysuckle.”

I put her fingers to mine and fumble for the petals. Most land into my mouth, while the rest fall on my gown and the darkening water. I feel like a child accepting a candied date. Giddiness washes over me, hot as the water, and my vision blurs.

Ilona Jo squeezes my shoulder as Dorkó fills the tub, and Darvulia pushes my hair away from my face. “There, there.”

She whispers something under her breath, steady, a thread I can follow.

A song, an old folk song about spring wind on the water that my wet nurse would pass to me. Almost all these folk songs are about a woman lamenting her lost love, and this one is no different.

I’m alive, and my heart, for the first hour after I can stand, is calm.

With my head heavy on my pillow, the middle of the night drapes its milky-moon grief over me as I think of who I was meant to be, once.

Wife. Teasing my hands over my husband’s knuckles, feeling his soft hairs.

Miklos fell from his horse and split open his head, where I would comb back his black curls and taste the sweet, powerful pálinka on his lips, as his mustache tickled my nose.

He would call me his arany virágszál—his golden flower, and I asked myself if he called his first wife that, a woman whose name he never told

me who died of typhoid fever with no children. Mother told me I would be better. Fresher. That a woman without youth is nothing.

Golden flower. Now, I do not feel like gold, but I feel like a daisy, frail and waiting to be tread upon.

Mother. I liked that soft swell under my fingertips.

But Mariska came out dead.

Mother never stopped trying to make me conceive. She consulted the folk-women and gave me concoction after concoction. A powdered dove heart, a sparrow liver, a swallow womb, hare kidney, three drops of Miklos' blood, amusedly given. I was convinced I was fallow, and while my mother assured me a miracle would happen, I was relieved.

Afraid.

Worried over what I could do, how I'd fail a child or myself. In being selfish.

And. In being unselfish, removing non-idyllic parts of myself, I recognized those were the parts I needed to relate to a child, to make them understand me as another human navigating the harsh and mercurial world. Trying to be that mother, the good mother, who was remembered fondly at the funeral. Quiet, soft spoken, never did anything bad to anyone. Only lived to help others, whittle away, and die.

And maybe before I went to Heaven, if I went to Heaven, I'd stare in that cool, fungal void, where I was reflected back to myself, and apologize for killing who I could have been.

I've already given my milk, blood, and tears for nothing.

I shut my eyes and see the ghost of myself emerge from blotches of color. Skin translucent. The blue vein in my right temple. My hands press against my mouth, and I follow the three like spider legs on the top of my hand, though I am not old.

Not old, but I feel as if I've been alive for decades. The idea sounds self-pitying, but if anything, it's numb, resigned.

I suck a pocket of air into my cheek.

I loll my head to the side and drowsily open my eyes, only to startle. In a desk chair with a plush bottom, the Countess sits in the dim candlelight. I see the crescent slivers of flame in those dark eyes. And then, the hearth fire sputters and roars, louder than my heartbeat, and her face is bright and yellow, the lines under her eyes and around her mouth pronounced. It only

makes her more distinguished and venerable. I can believe her ancestors are dragons.

When I blink, I fear that I might drift off again. It takes all my strength to pry them open, as rude as it feels to lie here while my lady waits for...why is she here?

I mumble, “You weren’t there.”

The light in her eyes shift, liquid shadows. Is she here at all, or a phantom of my opium-addled mind?

I have no right to ask her to be there with me, and yet, here she is.

“I didn’t think you’d want me to watch,” the Countess replies lowly. “It’s quite an ordeal, I know, and you already had three others in the room with you.” My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. She raises a hand. “But I came to see how you were.”

God.

I try to narrow the foggy space in my head, so I can say something coherent. Our last conversation floats back. About Lord Silvas and my fate after I’ve finished with my work here. Or rather, when the Countess is finished with me. My mouth feels full and dry. I cough, and the Countess shifts to touch something on the nightstand. A glint, a glass of water.

“Can you raise yourself up?” she asks me. “Or do you need assistance?”

My pride flares. The next time I try to speak, I wince, and so I clumsily rise shoulders-first. Not immediately, but after several heaving attempts. I think that I might die if I don’t have water in the next minute.

When she offers the glass, I accept with trembling hands. To my shock, the Countess wraps her touch around mine and presses my palms into the cool glass, and her iron leaks into me. As she lets go, I straighten my shoulders and raise the glass to my lips. The water on my tongue is bliss, even colder than I dreamed. I gulp and gulp until it’s gone too soon.

After, I stare down at the empty glass. My vision is soft around the edges.

More, my frenzied but sluggish mind cries. More.

Mournfully, I say, “When my duties here are finished, I may be made to marry the man who attacked me, as punishment.” I hate to retread the issue, but the idea makes me sad and hopeless.

“So long as I am alive, that won’t happen.” I could never have predicted how fierce her voice is now, and my loose mind can’t determine why. I’m

not a friend. We barely know one another.

“I will have to marry again sometime. My family cannot afford otherwise.”

“Has your mother truly given you that ultimatum?” I don’t answer, which confirms it. "That is disappointing. To give your own daughter to a brute..."

“He gave her little choice.” I can’t help but defend my mother. Who else do I have?

“Oh, there are always choices, and always ways to make a man’s life more difficult, a hundredfold the trouble he has caused.”

Her threat. *I’ll have him gelded.*

Burrowing the back of my head into my army of pillows, I say airily, “Sometimes I think I have never been a woman. Perhaps as a child, I was a girl. Never a woman. Not a man either, really.” A creature who doesn’t belong, a changeling. “But this, this reminds me of what I should be.”

“I understand.”

Reflexively, I ask, “Do you?” Every syllable out of my mouth clings to my gums like sweet wine. A challenge like this one wouldn’t come from my mouth sober, although I swear I’ve asked this before. Or no, she’s said, *I understand*, and I felt well enough to believe her.

“Yes.” More force, more ardent than I expected. “When I was a child, I would go around in pants and pretend I was a prince or pirate. A girl of high caliber, playing pretend. My mother and father let me. I didn’t mind the dresses, but when I started my first flux, and my parents arranged a betrothal for when I turned fifteen, I began to feel the cutting laces of womanhood, before I ever experienced girlhood. And I don’t mind being a woman, but the expectations can be difficult, even if I have luxuries others do not, because I know that there will always be plots to undermine me.”

After a lapse, I mutter, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being here. For having them help me. I feel freer than I’ve been in a long while.”

“Don’t thank me for executing my duties. There are simply things that must be done. I’m providing care for someone under my demesne. That is all. It’d be negligent to let this pass.”

The pit of my stomach twitches; I say that I'm free, but it's the future. For now, I am curled inside it, curled inside my own cramping womb.

"Do you like mushrooms?" she asks very suddenly, and I can't hide my indignation. I'm thinking of my lonely future, I'm bleeding in bed with only a cloth pad taking in the procedure residue, and she wants to talk about *mushrooms*.

I'm delirious, but I find I don't care. My eyes are closed; I must be asleep.

"Hm," I grunt, shutting my eyes. "Yes."

Yes, it's dark in the woods tonight.

A pang stirs deep in my navel. Need, but I can't. I'm bleeding.

I'm a handmaiden, and I must marry. Must become healthy enough to have my new husband's child.

It becomes like a crib song in my head. I'm a handmaiden, and I must marry.

God. Lord Silvas, I don't want him.

A woman floats above me, then flush against me, lustrous brown hair loose and tapering over her exposed shoulder blades.

Poor lamb, bleeding again.

We stand at the edge of the woods. No, I stand, and she clings a white satin robe to her collarbone, her hip jutting toward me, half the globe of her backside visible. Hungry, I want to cradle her close, realizing that though I feel small.

She's no longer the vibrant dead Countess pining by the window. Another Countess from another country and another time. She's the Fairy Queen of lore, tempting me into the forest's vulva, into her world of thorns and wild berries. I want her to. I want to disappear into the forest din.

Without words, she speaks: *My mind has betrayed me, and all I have are these fragments. Let me see myself in your eyes. See me. Please, stay with me, die with me, so we may be like lovers who die, so that they may be together.*

She nudges her lips against mine, soft but firmer than the gentle sponge of a sweet cake as I return the kiss. She tastes of vanilla and honey with an undercurrent of something dark, that harsh tang of bitterness after the initial redolence of a pomegranate seed.

If she kisses me any deeper, she'll devour me, or I'll devour her—

My eyes snap open to pale morning light seeping through the blue curtains.

“How was your doze?” the Countess asks me quietly, in the same spot. Except she’s holding something in her lap.

I look at the window and the dust motes languidly dying on the floor. I blink fuzzily, still sitting up on a mountain of pillows behind my head. “It was odd.”

“Are you having fanciful poppy dreams?” I latch on to the “fanciful,” which to the Countess means the same as frivolous.

“Yes, you could say that.”

She hands me a bowl of creamy yellow soup; the pungent smell of potato-leek broth, paprika, and lemons rise and make my mouth water. And of course, floating in the hot, steaming stew with the green parsley shavings, are thick mushrooms.

Lady Báthory says, “I’ve only ever cooked for my husband. When he would return from war.”

My heart flutters. “You *made* this?” I’m touched that she would do that, despite my mind telling me that no one would do that to me as a kindness, that I must be wary.

“Yes. Don’t become too accustomed to it. I don’t usually bring bedside meals. This is a unique occasion.” Despite her playing it off, I’m touched.

“Thank you, this is very gracious.”

“It’s nothing.”

Nothing. A domestic ritual she’s only done for her husband. I realize that I only ever cooked for Miklos, too.

“I don’t know if I can eat yet.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes.” Never did I think it was possible to feel both so ill and hungry at once.

“We should have taken your appetite into account before giving you opium. I won’t force you, but if you think you’re able, I’d like you to try. I know it mustn’t help your fatigue to not eat well, though I can’t blame you; during my hardest pregnancies, the physicians told me my stomach sickness would abate, but I could barely eat during the first five months. The rest, I was insatiable.”

While the Countess' foods at the dining table are never tasteless, the soup is the best meal I've had in weeks. It's buttery and easy on my throat, with a hint of white wine.

After I all but lick the bowl clean, I tell her with a satisfied hum, "That was very good."

Haughtily but in good humor, she replies, "I would think that you inhaling that in under a minute would constitute more than 'very good,' but I'll accept it."

Mortified by the fresh smear of soup all over my mouth and chin, and dripping down my throat, I say, "M'sorry for my ill manners."

"There's no need to apologize." Her face is oily from that greasy sheen of makeup worn too long.

I blink lethargically. "Who dressed you?"

"You did."

To my horror, studying the shadows under her eyes, I come to slowly understand. "You haven't gone to bed."

"You've been fortunate not to see on my insomniac nights. Or my nights of somnambulism."

"You sleepwalk?" I once did, but only when I was around six years old in the summer and autumn. Maybe the demon in me became bored.

"Not as much as I did when I was young," replies the Countess.

"How will you fare in court, if I don't tend to you?"

"I think it can wait a day." Her voice has an usual rasp, perhaps from lack of sleep. Even with food in my belly, my head spins. "If there are pressing needs, I will request Anna Darvulia's help."

I don't remember when I start dozing again, but I'm lying in the Countess' bed with the hearth so high and bright that I can't fully see it without my vision going white. There's something Other about it; this is the fairy realm.

The Countess stands above me with a hand outstretched, and needing anyone's gentle touch, craving the precise cartography of her experienced fingertips, I grasp her. I take her hand into both of my own and, in a world of smoke, press her lotion-softness hard against my chemise, my ribcage. My heart rises to her caress, and I see her face grow flushed, her breathing shallow as her throat and jaw work. She leans closer.

Reaching up, keeping her on my heart, I reach up and knead my palm into the space where her heart must be, relishing its swift thumps against me. I thrill at the hitch of her bosom below my fingers.

In that long and stifling and achy silence, our veins are one; our hearts are one.

Then in a rush, she removes her hand from my chest and grips that offending hand in both of hers, pressing her thumb in that tender spot between my center knuckles.

“Your hands are cold,” I whisper. *My Countess, let me make them warm.*

I want to recoil from her chill, but she is above me, in all meanings. No matter my noble name, she is a Báthory, the blood of warlords and kings. Closer to god than anyone else in the land. this isn’t only what I think. This is what Lady Báthory herself knows. What she wants she will get, or else. I haven’t yet seen “or else” firsthand.

Perhaps this is what draws me to her, after all. If one has a chance to kiss an angel, no matter how terrifying, or if you turn to salt or ash, wouldn’t you?

But it’s more than that. I know she is more than her mask; I should know because I’m the one who rests it on her face.

When I look at her again, I startle. A woman, her near-black hair moon-slicked, her face narrow and lips red and full, smiles down at me. Her eyeteeth are like a wolf’s.

“You must flower,” the dream-stranger tells me, voice like sumptuous velvet, lighter than the dark liqueur of the Countess’ voice. “You must, because no matter how much you try to rise, they’ll doom you to fall.” The last word ends on a tremor, and I have the sense that though her crystalline eyes stare at me, she’s speaking to herself.

I wake up, or fall asleep, and she’s with me as I sit at my vanity, smaller and less lustrous than hers, and I grimace at the pangs in my hip.

The Countess is here, but she’s dressed down without her surcoat, no rouge or foundation on her face. Her face is tinged pink from where she’s scrubbed it. Night remains.

She waves for me to move. “Here, let me help you into clean clothes.” Her voice, like a note from the long throat of a cello, likely doesn’t mean to come out as a bark, but it does.

I want to tell her about the woman who was by my bed, but what could it possibly mean? Ghost-creature. Moon-woman. Fairy Queen.

And I almost die of humiliation when I realize blood has leaked through my shift. Surely, it's below her station to be here, tending to me in her own fastidious way as she gestures with snappish movements for me to get up, though her eyes soften at my wince.

"I don't think I can move. How long will it take?" I grouse, words still mealy. How long has it been? It's still not, but the hearth doesn't look low.

I dreamed I, I dreamed that I pressed her hand to my chest. Thank God it was only just that, but why does her manner seem so unguarded now?

"To dress you?"

"No, for the bleeding to stop."

"Maybe a few hours more for the worst of it, but you might bleed for days after. This is normal. Your body cleaning yourself."

Yes. It was that way with Mariska. Not only days. Weeks. Until I believed I would bleed forever.

Another cramp seizes my middle, takes the breath from me. "Oh. Oh, dear God."

I stumble to the chamber pot, and without that thin membrane of self-consciousness, release a choked sigh as I feel myself leak even more, passing another globby clot.

The only time I've felt blood that wasn't mine was when I bit Lord Silvas.

"Will it ever stop?" I whisper sadly. "Truly?"

"Yes. It always does," she reassures softly. "A small mercy."

"Do you think I made the right choice?"

"We can only make the best choices for ourselves. If you think it was the right thing, then it must be."

Cleaning myself and standing, I snort. "That's not how morality works."

"Sometimes, we can only rely on our own judgment. And we must accept that when given our choices, we did the most logical thing we could. With that knowledge, I would say you made the right choice. It's the one I would've made."

"Therefore, it's correct," I reply dryly.

"Most certainly."

I trust her.

When she gives me some sage tea, I drink it whole.

“What does it taste like?” the Countess asks.

I hum. “Licking sugar off butterfly wings. Sweet but earthy, like the limbs of an insect.”

“I can’t tell if that’s your abstract mind at work or the opium lingering.”

Is my mind abstract? I feel like it was once before I became focused on duty. Appearances and obligations became everything.

I tell her, “When I was a girl, I caught a butterfly and, curious, ate it. Mother was aghast.”

“Interesting. Come, there are fireflies dancing in the gardens. You can see them from the window.”

She guides me to where I can see the roses at night, and the long stretch of land before the wall, and then the woods. Indeed, little lights dance like roving eyes, and we watch them in silence together.

ELEVEN

6th of October

Blood still leaks from me, so every few hours, I have a new handcloth between my legs to soak it up. Now, it's barely a pink stain.

Lady Báthory is right. All it takes is time.

I'm better, but I'm not healed. Healing, such a pleasant word for something that only means that the wounds continue on.

When Captain Szabó ensures my safety as I wander and daydream, I fear he can sense the blood, but he says nothing. I fear the maids and the angel statues see, but life goes on.

Nevertheless, I can't banish that fear that, like the clear discharge that wouldn't leave, I'll always be bleeding, if only a little, for the rest of my life. Those three women who steadied me and pushed back my hair and ensured the water never chilled and sang to me are witches, aren't they? I can't even tell if any of them believe in God.

I sleep so much that the imprint of my body remains on the sheets and mattress, like the ghosts of autumn leaves on stone.

This bed has accepted my sadness and fatigue, so I love it and let it receive me.

One morning, I wake up to a folded note.

I hope your storms are less than they were yesterday.

The script is less practiced than the Countess'. Ilona Jo, I'm guessing. I smile and carefully put the paper in my nightstand. For the first time in a while, I see myself as a part of somewhere, this castle, the people here.

But it won't last.

And why not?

A lump begins to bloat in my throat. When I swallow, it distends in the cellar of my ribs.

“How are you feeling?” the Countess asks me over a meal of chicken paprikash and sour cherry soup with a dessert of poppy seed bread pudding. Stacked in the pink slurry of soup, the dark red cherries are glossy like drunk eyes.

Stone angels glower down at us.

“I am doing well.”

“Truly?” the Countess presses, as if she knows that is what I’m expected to say. She’s an odd one; most nobles want to hear certain niceties and don’t question if they’re true.

I am doing well. I feel like I belong here and that, somehow, life will work out in my favor.

“The bleeding is less. I will be happy when it’s done. I’ve been weary, but that is all.”

Her eyes flicker over my face. “Do you need to take another day off?”

I shake my head. “I need to do my duties. I can’t rest in bed forever; I’m already restless. It might drive me mad.”

“I understand not wanting to remain idle, but Darvulia or Ilona Jo can assist me. You must rest.”

How soon I’ve tied my work to my self-worth, my judgment of how well the day is faring. If I don’t have to help the Countess, I don’t know what I’ll do with my time, except sleep and wander.

Too soon, despite my sense of belonging, loss seeps into my bones. I want to be normal again. Useful.

“Perhaps I should rest,” I say reluctantly.

Too soon comes the creak of armor, as a guard comes into the hall, stopping halfway up the table, since standing any farther away would make it hard to hear from that distance.

“Yes?” the Countess asks, folding one hand over the other.

“My lady, a girl has been wandering the grounds for little over an hour, and she seems to be in poor shape. She’s limping.”

“I see. Is there any special reason why there was a delay in informing me? For, as you said, over an hour.”

“We thought it might be one of the Romanies and wondered if we should bother you with it.”

Clipped, the Countess replies, going to stand. “I am present, and you have bothered me with it, so I imagine something must be done about it.” She looks at me. “Noémie,” she says, and my heart swells at my name on her tongue, a thrill shuddering down my back. It feels forbidden, but I know that while I must be formal with her, she doesn’t need to use titles on her handmaiden.

“Yes, Lady Báthory?”

“If you can, go into the kitchen and ask a scullery-maid for a honey cake. If not, ask—”

I shakily go to stand, but a pang deep in my hip keeps me seated. “I can do it.”

I must have already gone mad to interrupt her like that in front of a guard. She doesn’t so much as scowl. She doesn’t need to. When I go to stand, the Countess waves for me to sit back down. A simple dismissal. “Go on and finish your meal.”

With that the Countess sweeps away to follow the guard. I set myself on eating and then finding her in the quarters where she usually allows ailing serfs to lie and be treated by Darvulia, Dorkó, and Ilona Jo. It’s the same hall where they treated me.

A heavy storm rolls over the castle, lightning lashing past the windows as the Countess hovers over the red-haired girl on the bed, whose face is pale as death, her breaths shallow and quick, her brown dress wrinkled and worn at the elbows and cups, and her arms are flush at her side as she lies down. On the console table by the bed, by a vase of roses, sits a large saw with a damascened frame and ivory handle. Its presence startles me.

By the saw, a pale-haired maid, freckled and no older than fourteen, stands with her hands knotted in front of her apron, her blue eyes wide as

she stares at the girl’s near-black foot. Apparently, it was run over with a carriage, which kept going once it rolled over her. The very image fills me with rage. There are accidents, and then there’s callous disregard.

Darvulia is by the door, beside me, with an apron over her cobalt-blue dress

Before she moves to the girl, she leans over and asks me, “How is your bleeding?”

“It’s minimal now,” I tell her, not taking my eyes off the girl and frustrated because I don’t know what to do to help her.

“Good.”

The girl must be no older than ten years old; I don’t envy her youth. One might think I pine to be a child again, when my social burdens weren’t so dire. But they were always there. This poor girl is suffering, and she’s completely helpless. Even if the girl were perfectly healthy, she would nonetheless be powerless. I might not have the agency I want, but I have more than this poor child.

Lady Báthory, with one hand, pushes the hair from the girl's face as she moans. She whispers something I don’t hear.

Moving to the end of the bed, Darvulia clutches the girl’s injured foot and picks it up to set it on a pillow.

“It hurts!” the girl cries, thrashing, “it hurts!”

Eyes half-lidded, the Countess murmurs over her, “I’m sorry, little one, but it must be done to heal you.”

The pale-haired maid, Szilvia, trembles. "Stop, stop, you’re hurting her.” Both the Countess and Darvulia ignore her as the old woman inspects the foot and the girl cries out.

“Come, we have some honey cakes for you,” the Countess softly tells the girl, sitting beside her and squeezing her hand. “What is your name?”

“C-Csilla,” the girl rasps.

The Countess puts a cake in Csilla’s hand. “What a pretty name.”

Lightning cracks outside, ribbing the room in white, making the girl look as if ghosts are scratching at her wan skin and patchy dress and her one rumpled blue sock. It’s then that I know she’s doomed, but the Countess refuses to give up on her.

After the girl eats the sweet, the treatment to reduce the infection starts; Darvulia uses a knife to give a shallow cut before she seals a hot wax cup

near the crying girl’s ankle, using a candle flame to try to draw out impurities. It is little different than methods used by torturers, but so are leeches and maiming. There’s little, to the casual observer, to separate medicine and surgery from butchery.

As the heat grows, Csilla’s moans turn to screams, mucus running from her nose, and Szilvia surges forward and tugs on the Countess’ sleeve.

“You can’t do this, you’re—”

The Countess whips around and strikes Szilvia across the cheek. The girl emits a whimper and clasps her cheek.

Deathly quiet, flexing her fingers by her side, Báthory says, “Take your mewling and simpering elsewhere. Or I'll strap you to another bed and commit tenfold to you.”

No, I must say nothing. Bite my tongue. Swallow my sick. Be well-behaved, eyes falling to the floor, bottom lips sucked in. Countess Báthory has already done so much for me. I almost run out of the room altogether, but I take a deep breath.

“Stop it,” I say to the Countess, who looks up from the procedure to stare at me owl-eyed.

“*What?”*

Before I can answer, Szilvia hurries in front of me and leaves the room, her uneven lope scattering down the hall. Her absence punctuates a painful silence, interrupted only by the orphan child's croaks and moans.

“There was no need for violence. She's only worried about the girl’s pain.”

The Countess’ eyes blaze, but I stand firm. “*She?* You don’t think I am? There’s only so much opium I can give her without killing her.”

“We are all concerned. There’s no need to strike anyone like a beast gone mad.”

Her heavy brows don’t move, but there’s that deep, imperious scowl. I am a breath away from waking the dragon. “Who are you to tell me what I’m allowed?”

I straighten my spine. “My lady, my apologies for my forwardness, but I only have a difference in opinion on presentation. I think we can have others do as we bid without violating decorum.”

For the first time since I’ve known her Darvulia laughs behind us. A discomfiting gesture for someone so close to a bonesaw.

“I don’t have time for this,” the Countess snaps, nose flaring, looking between Darvulia and me.

The girl’s eyes flicker furtively between all of us. Her fingers, in the moted light, are sticky from the treat Lady Báthory offered her.

Darvulia tells the Countess grimly. “There’s no saving her foot, my lady. We must cut it off and stymy the blood. And pray the infection hasn't already spread.”

And then, the Countess looks at the old woman, and then me. Her voice is low. “Then, help me hold her down.” She looks at Darvulia. “You use that saw, and we will keep her in place.”

Immediately, the Countess goes to the girl and, after patting her temple, pins her down by her right shoulder. Darvulia immediately obeys while I freeze in place, staring at the girl’s eyes as they find the saw, and in horror, she screams and tries to writhe away from the Countess, who then puts her other hand above the girl’s chest.

Looking up, the Countess’ dark eyes pierce my soul. “*Now.*”

As she lounges on one of the tiled steps of the decadent bath, her nude body steeped in water heated from the fire, the Countess tells me, “She’ll need to use a stick around the castle, but one of the maids has taken a liking to her.”

“Good.” I massage peppermint oil into the black waves of her hair. I love combing my fingers through her shining and thick hair; it’s truly beautiful and sable. When I see the Countess, I see her as the epitome of a woman. Many might imagine someone my age or younger, but I see her lines and scars and know that she’s lived with a dignity I strive for, all with her stern beauty, a dark rose amid belladonna and hemlock.

Meanwhile, I don’t know how I feel about my own beauty and body. I don’t hate my hair and face, though sometimes it feels like it in my worst moments, but I don’t feel like I fill the space the same way she does, with the same femininity. My face feels too long for that, the lines around my mouth are distinguished, my lips are long and thin instead of bowed and plush.

I think of my queasy thoughts after the abortion. As a girl I felt like a girl, but I'm unsure if I've ever felt like a woman. Or if I have, it's been a season that passes. At first, I considered this idea to be nonsensical. How can it be so, when my life has been defined by attempts at being a wife and mother, and I often feel like I'm at war with my womb?

A changeling, never meant to love and have children.

Eager to end the swelling silence, I tell her, "I've been reading German poetry, and I've taken a liking to it. My mother has complained that German is a very harsh language, but I think it's beautiful and ponderous."

"Yes," she murmurs, perhaps lulled by the fragrant musk of roses and citrus wafting through the steamy room. "I think so, too. The aesthetic of those poems remind me of parts of dreams I've had, but I scarcely remember most of them."

Despite the heat, gooseflesh prickles her upper arms. I wonder what it'd feel like if I skimmed my fingers from the marble of her shoulder to her elbow to her wrist.

The light music of rain peppers the arched windows.

"Have you tried writing your thoughts and dreams down?"

She frowns. "My writing is for business. I don't waste paper reminiscing or philosophizing."

With a towel, I pat and rub her hair dry. "Is it a waste?"

"For me, yes. That is for poets. I may like reading poems and stories, but it's never been in me to write any. I haven't been that imaginative since I was a child, when I would run through the castle in boy's clothes and pretend to be a prince."

"Or pirate."

"Ah. I wasn't sure how much you remembered from that night."

Heat spreads across my cheeks. "Admittedly, not much." A tired smile scythes across my face. "That's funny. I can't imagine you looking like a boy."

"Yes, my parents even let me cut my hair short for a time. I suppose they thought I could get it out of my system before I was betrothed and learned my duties from my mother-in-law. I think it worked."

"You never dream of adventure?"

I try not to think of the swell of her line-scarred breasts beneath the water, which of course, it being water, I can easily see through.

“When I think about being a prince or a pirate now, oh, just consider the logistics and headaches of both. I rule over a large amount of land, but an entire kingdom? Petitioners going out the door? And I can’t tell the stern from the starboard.” Her eyelids lower. “Please, if you can, stay with me tonight.”

I try to hide my smile. “Of course, my lady.”

My lady.

Mine.

TWELVE

11th of October

Despite all the horrors that have happened, I begin to believe I can conquer my demons. Despite everything, I've survived, and I savor my meals again. Paprika, either spicy or sweet, and lemons and garlic flavoring every piece of chicken, lamb, or fish. I eat red sloshes of paprika-laced veal stew with a side of nokedli, egg dumplings as white as my dead skin will be.

As the days pass as autumn days do, both languid and far too swiftly, I enjoy parts of life again while leashing flames in me that I don't understand or have names for.

In the late evening, I look for the Countess and find that she isn't in her room or her solar. Regardless of the lingering scents of herb-encrusted paprika chicken and halászlé, the dining hall is vacant.

Given the hour, I find it unusual that I don't know where the Countess is, especially when the guards outside her chambers haven't seen her since morning. It's strange for a castle to lose its lady, and again, it's late. I know her well enough, at least. The hummingbird pulse of fear beats in me that, against all odds, she might have run afoul of whatever dark presence is killing women here.

Perhaps in my previous descriptions, I haven't captured the enormity of the castle. In my ill health and grief, I confined myself to certain halls and didn't stray.

Now, I traverse stairs and halls I'd never seen, some musty from disuse but bearing the same vibrant Flemish paintings and geometric and intricate Turkish rugs. Cobwebs swing under some doors. I wondered how one could have so many rugs. Surely, they'd all mildew eventually. And indeed, the lingering smell in some places, despite the castle's constant use, is dampness.

No amount of flames or colorful fabrics, or rekindling and replacements, to hide the cold, gray stones could mask the creep of mold. In one hall, I almost trip on a mouse that furtively darts into a crack in the wall.

I avoid the hall that I know belongs to the Countess' two adolescent daughters, though it's possible she's visiting them. Either way, I shouldn't intrude.

Eventually, squirreling away in the bowels as the sun starts to slip away from behind the dense and moldering curtains, my ankles begin to throb when my nostrils catch, in one dimly lit hall, the astringent burn of perfume; I hear a soft moan and the rustling of sheets, and light emanating from an ajar door.

For a moment, I go very still before inching toward the door. Every part of my body tells me no. Turn away. Don't bite into the fruit. It's as if the progress I've made to rebuild my shambled life rests on my choice. My breath stops on my tongue.

Curiosity wins out, and as quietly as I can muster, I peek into the warm, dancing light of the room.

Inside the room, on a violet king-sized bed, is a tangle of limbs. Two fully nude women sit on their knees and kiss. I recognize them, Lady Vago and Lady Danos. The fire plays on their bare legs and thighs.

Danos splays against the mountain of pillows with her dark blonde, long tresses and longer legs. Vagos falls with her as they kiss, and Danos softly moans as the other woman plunges her hand past her hip and starts to work her fingers into her sex, spread pink and wet before me.

My cheeks are aflame, and I almost jump out of my skin when I finally notice the Countess dressed in the vermillion velvet I placed upon her this morning. She's sitting in a plain chair by the hearth, her eyes fiery and pinned on the two cavorting women. When she rises, I can't help but imagine her prowl like a panther's, deathly and sleek.

Danos arches her pink, stiffened nipples, centered in the middle of an expanse of silvered stretch marks. and as Lady Vagos dips her tongue to taste her clit, Danos moans, "Erzsébet, please, join us now."

Startled and ashen, I look away. They don't know I'm here, so it's not my right to spy. To violate this secret rite. Which is what it feels like. More than any spells the three old women of the castle could do in the dead of night.

Fingers on the stones, like a ghost, I slip away and ignore the dull pang below my navel. Once I reach the end of the hall, I race away and began to sweep up stairs upon stairs, my breaths ragged.

I’m not certain what to think. As far as I know, a man can penetrate a woman or another man, and that is the only real definition of sex according to the Church. But a woman cannot do that to another, the phallic penetration, so it isn’t sex. Just self-pleasure with four extra hands.

She has had one of her falling sickness episodes, which even if she's endured it over the course of decades must terrify her. Her special herbal baths, which make her smell of cloves, might help, but she can't control when her pain comes. And then there was the death of the little girl. So of course, she needs catharsis.

Why am I thinking this over so much? Why can I not get that tangle of limbs out of my bed. The space between my legs throbs not for the first time this month, but not with pain anymore.

I stop at a landing, trying to catch my breath. Under my green dress, I squeeze my thighs and knees together. The wetness must be the remaining blood from my procedure. Disgusting. I’m repulsive.

I’m going mad.

Why has God done this to me?

Such a heretical thought tastes like ash.

Why do I feel so betrayed by God and Countess Báthory?

When I get close to the lady’s chambers and find two guards posted outside the hall, as usual, I must don a mask.

“I must prepare for my lady’s undressing for the day,” I say, and they don’t stop me. After all, my chambers are near hers at the end of the hall; they can’t bar me from my own room.

Instead of heading into the safety of my room, I go into the Countess’. The hearth is blazing from being relit in the late afternoon. I can still smell the flowers and smoke of my lady, and the thought fills me with bitterness.

Alone, I sit at her vanity and see myself split in her two mirrors. Both too young and too old.

My heart beats fast and hot as I decide what to do. I should go to my room and listen for the Countess, only coming in here to undress her for bed. Then leave. If she finds me waiting on her, I’m unsure how she’ll feel. Is it so strange? I’m accustomed to being here at this hour. And I’m—

This heat in me. Anger? Why should I feel wrath toward anyone? My palms sting, and I turn them up and unfurl my fingers, furious pink half-moons left where I clenched my hand.

Somewhere beyond, I hear a lone wolf howl and snap my head toward the iron-latticed window. Is that our elusive killer?

A shadow leaks into the room. If only it were the murderous wolf here to eat me and put an end to my tumult!

Instead, the Countess emerges, uncharacteristically mussed, the laces of her dress askew. Her hair is loose, a wild sable curtain that must feel silky. What it does to her distinguished face and intense eyes—God, my heart won't stop trying to escape my body. Please, Madam Wolf, I know you can hear me.

Shutting the door behind her, the Countess stares. "Have you been waiting here for long?"

The quiet goes on for too long until my answer bubbles up in me violently.

"I know what you were doing. I didn't know where you were, but I found you. I saw you."

A pause. She doesn't look shocked.

"Were you watching?" she asks lowly.

"Watching?" Her inquiry makes me feel like a lurid voyeur.

Her words continue to cut into me. "I don't think any part of that question was unclear."

"Not intentionally."

"So, you were." Instead of the expected anger, dark amusement spreads across her features. "Why were you in that corner of the castle?"

I should simply tell her I was looking for her, but it sounds pathetic, like a dog searching for its master. Venom infects me. She's asking me why I was there when she shouldn't have been cavorting with two women in the first place. "I wasn't aware it was off limits. I suppose I will ask for permission next time."

"Enough of your insolence."

The hairs on the back of my neck bristle.

I resist her attempt to push me back into my role; I resist her.

"Do you want me to be docile for you? kneel at your feet? Kiss them? I thought you wanted more than a sweet doll to play. Perhaps I was mistaken."

"What has gotten into you?"

“Got into me? God, this past year, what hasn’t? *Who* hasn’t? For days, I've had to bleed, and I've accepted it as my lot as the disgraced widow. I know that I can never reach the heights of even my lady mother. I feel my tainted womanhood every time I move, and here you are, whoring like a man, as if, as if a woman can do that without the most grievous consequences.”

“What consequences, a bastard child? Something tells me that I don’t need to fret about that.”

“You know what I mean.”

“If I were a man, there would be no criticism; he might be lauded. Would you deny a widow her pleasures? Am I meant to shrivel in a tower? Or is it the sex of my partners that you despise?”

“No, it isn’t that.” I’m not sure if that’s the truth. All my life, the idea of men lying with men and women lying with women has rarely been spoken about, but it’s associated with sin, the depraved opulence that led to the decline of the Roman Empire.

“Then again, I imagine there’s more to your complaint than a mere act. Is it me you’re envious of, or them?”

I swallow thickly. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Please. Now isn’t the time to act callow, girl.” I wince at that word. “You may be recovering, but you forget yourself.”

I bear my teeth. “I’m not your girl.”

“Aren’t you?”

Her words aren’t a personal claim; they’re an accusation. Her, accusing me after what I’ve witnessed!

My jaw hardens. If only my resolve would. “You are my lady, and I am your lady-in-waiting.”

“Yes, I surely know our places, no need to remind me. I don’t know what you think about me, but I’ve never once, no matter the rumors of errant Habsburg apple-polishers, enforced my presence on any of the maids. No matter what latent wishes you possess, that has never been my aim, but you...”

Caustic, burning, I say, “I’ve never seen you as a deviant, not until now, but I suppose it’s not the place of inferiors to judge.”

“That’s true, but you’re evading the core of the matter. My question.”

Is it me you’re envious of, or them?

“I don’t know why you’d ask me such a thing.”

“I’ve seen how you look at me when you dress me. And when I’m in the bath.” I forget how to breathe. “Did you forget how you pressed your hand to my heart, and moved mine to yours?”

My heart quickens in dread, as if she’s reached into it. “That was a dream.”

It wasn’t only you. There was the other woman from my dreams.

“Then, it must be contagious, since I remember it quite vividly.”

Your hands are cold.

The blood drains out of my face, and at the same time, the heat of the fire makes my body prickle with sweat.

She cannot sleep with me; I’m bleeding and disgusting.

Sweeping in front of me, the Countess cups my jaw in both her hands. The skin under her touch bursts to life, not unpleasantly. Her voice is low and deliberate, her breath tasting of wine against my lips; her own are still swollen from kisses.

“Are they cold now?” she murmurs.

I find it impossible to close my mouth, my breaths heavy and ragged. “No.”

Her next words strike me like an arrow. “You may feel whatever you feel, God knows that emotions are hardly ever rational, but don’t impress your shame on me. I’ve carried much for decades. I’ve been tasked with my own family’s legacy, and with their domains and my lord husband’s.”

“I—”

“I was wed to my husband for almost thirty years, and for most of that time, he was away. I was loyal, nonetheless, with him being the only soul I slept with once he returned to the castle and sought to further our issue. All that time, even as a girl, I’ve had the Crown breathing down my neck. Do not presume you understand what I do in these years where I spend nearly all my time tending to the needs of everyone but myself.”

“Hm.” She smells like sex and sweat and God. My voice lowers, and I say throatily, “I’ve been impudent. Presumptuous. Judgmental. I wonder, will you slap me? Have me stripped and lashed? You’d like that, I think. Maybe you’d even like to paddle me yourself and see my buttocks redden.”

Both her brows rise. “Have you gone utterly mad?”

As I look down at her, my head reels with a scorching giddiness that slants the hot room sideways. We are so utterly close that I'm inhaling her perfume, her thick taste as pungent as tobacco, her smoke and flowers an inferno beating a tattoo of hazy petals into my lungs.

I fear that any closer, and I might eat her.

Damn her, damn her, damn her.

Nevertheless, I lean in, our lips close—

The Countess lets me go, stepping back with such force that I stumble. I can't mask the hurt at her rejection, my utter disappointment.

How can I be disappointed? I was a fool for ever thinking we might have anything. I just tried to kiss her. I'm ruined. Hot and cold war in me.

Or maybe I was already ruined all along, and this was a final chance to save myself. Prove that I can be desired and loved.

"We can't do this."

Petulantly, the wild wolf-maid in me says, my mouth twisting, "But you can fuck Vago and Danos."

My Countess. Not theirs. Not the Habsburgs'. Not Hungary's. They weren't the ones lying in bed and given soup that the Countess made herself.

She straightens, eyes narrowed to slits. "You are under my care. Beyond that, I'm old enough to be your mother."

Lady Báthory might as well have slapped me. I'm not supposed to be attracted to her. Even when I felt that lurch in my stomach, that flutter in my chest, I never said what it was because I didn't recognize it. The idea of being wanted and wanting without shame is alien.

She's right. There's nothing in the natural world that could bring us closer in power.

I'm split in twain with a hope that's flown away before I could grab it. The hope that the Countess could be my salvation. She'd fall in love with me and install me at her castle or one of her other estates permanently. I could be like Ilona Jo and grow old and happy. Most of all, I wouldn't have to marry Lord Silvas.

Don't be stupid, Noémie. Look at you. You might not be soaking your clothes with blood, but it's still faintly there.

Miserably, I crumple into myself, keeping everything taut, so I may keep myself together. If I break, if I fall to the stones, I won't get back up. I'll

keep bleeding forever, a loose and liquid phantom. I am a twisted, lonely creature.

I'm so selfishly consumed by desire I've denied that I kissed a woman who might've done away with her previous servants; I chose to forget until my life became bloody again.

Tangling my fingers in my hair, I rasp, "I cannot be here anymore."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her reach out. "We can discuss this."

Damning the consequences, I wrench away from her grasp. "No, leave me be." It hurts to lurch to my feet.

Her need to reconcile now feels far too matronly, only deepening the wound in me. The soup, her helping me dress. It all takes on a horrible, sinking darkness. It isn't that I misinterpreted her actions as advances; no, I lied to myself so much that I confused my own heart, even when she saw through me.

I don't need her as a mother now. I have a mother, and she's enough. I need the Countess, I need Erzsébet as a...

But I can't.

I am not meant to be her lover. I will marry a man.

She is the Countess to me. Of old, venerable blood.

With her hand pressed to her collarbone and waves of black hair in wild disarray, she looks shaken.

In the end, I leave her in her chambers to attend to herself, while I sulk, kneeling by my own hearth and failing to stifle my tears. God, I feel like such a petty adolescent. As a girl, I never had anyone I fancied enough for it to ache. I would read the fairy stories and sweeping romances full of sacrifice and overtures and I simply couldn't understand.

Now, as small rivulets of pinkish discharge trickle down my thigh, hidden by my skirt, I'm being torn asunder. I lie on the gray wolf fur rug and hug my arms tightly to my chest. I try not to touch myself, and I'm on fire.

I cannot indulge myself because, as the Countess said, I'll forget myself. I'll start to think I can do anything I want.

Without anywhere to vent my frustrations, my vision blurry with tears, I stifle my scream only by sinking my teeth in my wrist. It's not hard enough to draw blood, but my skin stings, and when I let go, angry red crescents are indented on my flesh.

It’s a long while until I have the strength to rise, and as I do, something catches my eye, a flash in the window. I wobble to it.

Two bright lights, tiny, hovering spheres that make my vision ache and swirl more.

A light rain patters on the window, streaking the broken and wrought face of my reflection. I go to step back, but I freeze. A chill ripples down my back.

My hackles rise; I feel myself being watched. It’s those lights, those eyes.

I gaze out past the castle walls at the woods and feel a tug in my chest.

Lights in the forest, a star. or a fairy. The Beautiful Lady, who leads men astray.

I can’t. My feet, my hands, my neck. I try to press my tongue to the roof of my mouth, but it lies dead.

I can’t control my body.

The Beautiful Lady, the Fairy Queen, is calling and she wants to kiss me. I clasp my Saint Saturnina necklace, hand around the oval trinket, and yank hard, ripping it off my neck.

I can’t take this life anymore.

Take me, then. Bite me. Bleed me.

I cannot live resigning myself to my fate, telling myself that I’m fortunate that I won’t suffer worse.

“Go on,” I cry under my breath, “make me yours. Give me teeth. Make me see.”

I storm down the castle halls in a furious haze; I see nothing but a fog black as night, until my bare feet touch grass and pebbles, and—

A helmeted man intercepts me. “My lady, may I ask where you are going? It is late, and the Countess wishes for her help to remain inside.” He’s young, younger than me, and I can see his brown eyes wide in nervousness as he approaches a noble lady in only a chemise.

“I’m having my monthly flux, and Dorkó has instructed me to take a walk at night to balance my humors.”

His voice grows deeper. “I’m unsure if you should leave the grounds without a chaperone.”

The world shifts around us. My words aren’t mine. I can’t explain it, someone is speaking through me, and their influence is leaking into the

inexperienced guard, ensuring that he doesn't lead me back into the safe, warm castle walls.

I tell the man, "It can be quite stifling here. I think I would prefer to be alone, only for half an hour or so."

"Are you certain you don't need a cloak or boots?"

"No, thank you."

He leaves me as I blindly trudge through a thorny veil of mist and darkness, my journey shadowed by oaks and conifers. Briars catch on my skirt and sleeves, until I come across what I think must be an angel with impossibly bright eyes, two slices of moon.

I fall, and she's on top of me. I try to suck back in the breath she knocks out of me, chewing on its remnants as my teeth clatter together and open a hole on the tip of my tongue.

At first, the pressure in my neck is almost pleasant, and a pang of arousal twinges between my legs, worse than ever, but the face I gaze into, a woman's behind streaks of tangled brown hair, is primal and furious.

She reels up her head for a moment, blood spraying from me, open, and dripping down her face—heavenly, bestial.

Her startlingly bright but dark eyes blaze; it is a face that might've once been regal and beautiful, with her bloodstained dress adorned with an elegant ruff that does nothing to restrain her as she molds into me and snarls, revealing two pointed, blackened eyeteeth.

The wolf.

The undead blood-drinker.

The vampire.

The Styrian Countess born a century before, fallen from grace and left to roam.

"Mircalla," I whisper. Ghost of a lonely, forgotten Countess. Another.

My blood roils, threatening to burst out of me. I caress her tears as a river of blood falls from one eye, her pale and unbruised skin is hard as stone, and she swiftly pins my hands to the thin crackle of dead-leaved earth.

"Take me," I cry, our lips close enough to graze, my nostrils flooding with the stench of dried blood, mingled with petrichor.

The vampire, my vampire curls, jams her knee hard against my navel to keep me down, and I flail at least hard enough for her to let go of one of my

wrists. Or maybe she is raising that hand, clawed with long, dirty nails, to cut my throat or silence me as I release a moan that warbles into a high wail.

I do what I only know to do when under attack.

Snarling, I bury my teeth into her wrist, and despite the unnatural coolness and hardness of her wan skin, I penetrate it, and a tide of hot blood pours into my mouth.

Though I choke, I don't relent. If she wants to kill me, then kill me and free my soul from its body-prison, but I'll make sure it hurts. Let her leave me broken and come away scarred and aching.

Though I've tasted blood before, hers is bitter and scours my tongue and throat. I taste everything I've experienced in my last moments. Distant not-quite-sex and an almost-kiss and smoky floral perfume and vinegar and blood. That penetrates through the reek of dirt and dried blood.

The mix of her blood and mine blackens my chemise, and my vision flickers when she wrenches my mouth away from her, painfully yanking my face in the other direction, and digs her teeth into my throat.

As she descends on me, burrowing deeper until I think her bite might decapitate me, her nose inches into my broken skin, I try to thrash, but my body is slowing down, betraying me.

My blood, my nerves, my soul, they all are leaving my body as she looks up and fades. I pulse and gasp and swallow, until I only know stillness and the bruised forever dark.

THIRTEEN

12th of October

My heart doesn’t beat, but I’m inside my body. The millipede-world crawls around me, the vampire likely gone into some dark hollow as soon as the sun starts to rise.

Despite my drama the previous night, I’m calm. My body can’t muster any panic. It’s empty.

My body itches. Grass. Ants. The dreams of rabbits and wolves.

And the deer, I’m sure the deer are dreaming now. They run and run and run.

The dew and light rain on my skin and hair offer relief and, despite the ache in my neck and mouth, I want to smile.

As I lie there and dawn comes, the moon, even with its diminished power, washes its balm on me, and the sun makes my bones so heavy I think they might sink into the silt.

Footsteps. A maid’s. I can tell the difference between Countess Báthory’s assured steps to the shuffling of her through witches to the self-conscious ambling of timid maids. I can tell her from anyone in the dark.

A pause.

A bird sings somewhere above.

My top gums feel as if they’ll erupt, and everything is coarse in me. Empty. Raw.

I remember first, a prayer, no, that’s not it.

A scream.

“Oh God, oh God, she’s dead! Christ’s wounds! Someone come, help! Help—!”

Or maybe it’s both a scream and a prayer. An invocation of God, the One who brought me back. Saved me. She’s crying to the heavens and wishing He might do that miracle, not knowing it’s already done.

Alive.

I can’t feel my heart, my pulse in my throat. I can’t open my eyes.

But I’m alive.

The pain in my throat is gone.

A high voice, a girl, a maid, her skirts rustling the leaves at some distance from me.

Her, and some men. Don't know how many. I could, I must open my eyes. I try, but I can’t. I feel the tremble of the earth.

Footesteps. Ten, nine, eight feet...

The girl: “Her throat was torn apart, I swear!”

Man One: “There is...quite a lot of blood. No one could survive this.”

A knee by my arm; I can feel its stout curve, and it twists from there to the sinews of the man’s neck. At first, I sense the muscles, and then my parched throat aches when the pulse in his throat throbs, as if calling to me.

Man One, grave: “Another one, Captain. They really won’t stop going into the woods. Who allowed her to go?”

Man Two: “There is an injury, but it looks shallow. She’s cold. Seems she’s been dead for hours, I would think.”

I recognize him, that booming timbre. Captain Szabó. I can’t decipher the strained note in his voice.

Stones, outside the castle, not sure where. The stones are cool with autumn.

The sun. Warm on me.

In any other circumstance, like when I walked with András and the others to the castle, I would’ve welcomed it. But its warmth is now alien to me. It doesn’t understand me, my skin, and it makes me want to sleep forever.

The land tremors, twigs snapping and dying leaves crackling. A bustle of people coming to inspect the body. Me.

Then, her dark contralto, deliberately low.

Lady Báthory: “Where did you find her?”

Captain Szabó: “The edge of the woods, Countess. We checked her body, and it’s cold. She must’ve been killed in the night.”

Lady Báthory: “She attended to me last night, but she, she left.” Her breath catches. “I thought she was in her room.” Then, her voice carries a menace. “Which one of you let her go past the wall at night?”

No one answers.

I know that she won’t cry in front of them. Will she cry for me? She shouldn’t have to.

Open your eyes, Noémie.

God, give me the strength to open my eyes.

Man Three: “It doesn’t seem to look as bad as the others.”

“‘It’? We are talking about my handmaiden, not the curtains.”

“Forgive me, my lady. I only meant the body. I didn’t.”

Szabó, softly: “Quiet, János.”

“Y-yes, yes, sorry—”

The Captain: “Did she just take a breath?”

János, unquiet: “It isn’t possible. Look at all the blood. She must be dead.”

“It might not be hers. She has no wound.”

“Forgive me, Captain, but that’s not true. Caked there around her neck, it looks like—”

“Jesus, Joseph and Mary. She’s alive, she’s alive, Countess.”

Countess Báthory draws a sharp breath.

There’s little time to waste. Her voice deepens its timbre, like gliding to the C-string of a viola.

“Bring her to the nearest free bed, in the guest chambers. You two, summon Dorkó, Ilona Jo, and Darvulia. Do not waste time. *Go.* And I will have my answer to which one of you is at fault, one way or another.”

I feel hands, more wary than before, lifting my body to carry it. And though the dewy grass wasn’t a harsh grave, my spine tingles in relief, as if I were a fussy babe put to bed, on the linens.

The most pressing sensation is in my throat. It throbs, that ache when I’ve kept my mouth open all night but a thousandfold. It might be blasphemy to wonder if this is what Christ felt being in the tomb for three days.

Need to eat. Drink. Anything.

God, oh God, thank You for saving me. I love You. Please. I must have water. I’m so thirsty, I think it may kill me.

I want to get up and shout, to run back to the castle and leave all my horrible regrets behind. Why had I let myself get so low when I didn’t know what I could easily lose? There’s a tether in me that’s been cut.

Yet again, I try to open my eyes, but they're heavy as clumps of wet sand. Perhaps I should let myself sleep while, even imprisoned here, I have a reprieve from my body. Always bleeding, never able to escape pain. Or give my husband a healthy child.

Before, I could hear voices and feel the slightest tremors, but now my mind is fog. My gums and tongue are swollen in my head.

I feel like I haven't had any water in weeks. In my darker moments when I barely drank or ate, my mouth would go dry, but not like his. My gums ache, and I feel that it'll only get worse. What's stranger is that I can feel a meager amount of vampire's blood inside of me, but I can't feel a heartbeat. It's sloshing inside my heart like liquid in a jar.

A heaviness on my shoulder, and then my chest, as if someone is lying there. If only I could lift my arm and feel who it is, identify every hair strand tickling me. Trying to sense a heartbeat, maybe.

Wearily, I groan under my breath; someone is gingerly pulling the leaves out of my hair.

A storm of footsteps approaches.

Curtly, the Countess barks close to me, "I do not want any more intruders. Is that understood?" A shuffle. "You have something to say at this inopportune moment, Captain?"

"If the lady has been terribly wounded by an unknown assailant, we must find this beast and bring him to justice, but for the lady, I think she might need a proper physician."

"If I wanted your opinion on her care, I would've asked for it. Of course, I know I am growing very old at eight-and-forty, and my memory is more frail than it's ever been, so please tell me when I asked you who would best care for her."

"Your Grace," the Captain concedes.

Then, I crack open my eyes, and the world erupts to life. I can't quite explain the immortal shift of senses, except that everything is saturated to the point of near-pain and ecstasy.

I flinch in someone's arms.

But it isn't just more color; after my slip into darkness, the sky has a depth and texture, as if I could pluck the clouds from the perfect blue and eat them like cake. The leaves and grass dig hard into my palms and even through my dress. I smell the musk of sweating men. I taste the soil and

lilies and smoke and rose oil and linen as if I’m pressing my face into the earth, or into the skin and hair of the woman above me.

The Countess isn’t only in her chemise gown; one of her crimson robes with golden roses hangs over her shoulders. Nevertheless, she seems to have only just gotten out of bed when she received news of my “death.” Her black hair is unspooled and tickling where, to my horror, my dress was ripped open.

I ache, but my injury doesn’t hurt, and when I see myself in her eyes. Above my broken but renewed body, she’s the most radiant person I’ve ever seen.

It’s hard to judge the mix of emotions stirring in me. I’m elated and rejuvenated, but at the same time tired and empty. I need, I need some water. If I don’t...

Szabó carefully cradles me in both his arms. I can smell his sweat and something like gunsmoke alongside the thrumming copper of blood.

I need...I must have...

“Look at me. Stay,” the Countess whispers. “Please.”

I try to obey, but I must sleep.

My heavy eyes close, and I hear a protest, a strong grip on my shoulder, but it’s as if a hand climbs out of the black morass of my dreams and yanks me down.

FOURTEEN

1609, 27th of March to 2nd of April
Five Months Later

Now ten years old, Orsik sticks out her tongue, pushing back her mop of thick black hair. “You are slow. You’ll never catch them like that.”

“Ah, forgive me,” I say weakly, setting a hand against the stone wall as light bleeds into my body and the stray cat hisses and darts away. “I don’t do well in the sun.”

“What do you mean?” She wipes her nose with the entire front of her hand, getting mossy grit from the castle stones on it.

I kneel on the stones as she hitches her skirt up to her knees and starts climbing the parapet lining the walkway of the second floor.

“I thrive more at night,” I explain to her.

I can feel the cats roaming about, and it’s maddening. Hunger, and then that nausea that only comes from not eating for a long time.

The cats are so full of blood that pumps as fast as their hearts. If I were to just drink a little—from them and not anyone in the castle—

“Orsik! Get down now!” The Countess’ voice harshly cuts through the early spring ease as she storms on to the stones, looking between Orsik and me with a pinched expression.

At her mother’s hasty order, Orsik reluctantly climbs down the wall.

The Countess looks over her daughter with a deep frown. “Dear God. Your dress is an utter mess.”

“I know, Mama.” She doesn’t pout or apologize, and when her serious, sharp brown eyes look up, she’s never looked more like her mother.

I wonder if she’ll chastise me for encouraging her daughter to misbehave and run around rather than study or learn proper etiquette. And I realize that I don’t have the patience to be berated. I almost died, and for two weeks, the Countess asked me about my symptoms and tolerated my irritation when she asked Darvulia if she thought I might need hot wax to

purify me of a disease, and I snapped and said no, I wouldn't fucking endure that.

I'm not a child. I am a lady, too. I don't need admonishments.

I rise to my feet. "She asked me to play with her."

She suddenly looks weary. "Make sure she doesn't climb."

"I'll try, though she must practice it somewhere."

A raised brow. "Must she? If you see her trying, make her stop. My sister Klara was an infant when a nurse set her on one of these walls, and she fell to her death."

A pang shoots through my starving heart. "Dear God. I'm sorry."

"It was long ago," she replies, as if that negates grief. "Orsik is too bold for her own good. She wants to run, and her sister wants to marry as early as possible. They both frighten me." Her eyes fall on me, and her frown deepens. "You still look wan. Has the stew and blood sausage stopped working?" Blood stew, pörkölt. made with either pig or cow blood.

"Not completely," I murmur forlornly. "I believe it's simply inadequate. I need more."

"I have an idea, something that might help. I usually go to Vienna in springtime. Would you like to go?"

I stare. I've always wanted to travel to Vienna, but I'm not sure how it'll help. Travel might further aggravate me, and if we are accosted and there's a hint of blood spilled... "There are cathedrals. Do you suppose I should pray and hope I'm cleansed?"

I can't hide my bitterness. I want to believe that God saved me for a reason, but why do I have these hungers?

Yes, hungers. There are other aching needs constantly on my mind.

The Countess cranes up her chin to meet my eyes. "There's an old friend who might be able to shed light on your condition. A physician."

"Can he cure me?" I ask.

"At the very least, she can offer some clarity."

"Perhaps the holiness of the city will stop this hunger."

Her mouth tenses. Skepticism. Oh, good. I'm in awe of her faith. "We can certainly try. I haven't received letters from Valentina in many months, but perhaps she's made progress on her research concerning people who have risen from the dead and garnered blood fixations."

I touch my stomach through my plain linen dress; I didn't want to wear the beautiful green dress she offered me when Orsik begged me to play with her because the other maids were, in her words, spoiling her fun by telling her to go back to her studies.

"I don't want to travel while hungry. I fear what I might do."

The Countess replies flatly, looking out at the blue sky, feathered with wispy clouds. Birdsong flutters in the air. "I'm sure if the blood sausage goes foul, there are rabbits and deer along the way."

I narrow my eyes. "That isn't funny."

She looks at me through half-lidded eyes, trying to hide her faint smile. "It wasn't a joke."

I swallow, and it hurts my dry throat. I'm unsure how to navigate this strange new dynamic between us. She is the most powerful woman in the land, but even the highest powers need companionship.

But she is my lady; and yet, I know that in a second, if I wanted to, I could overpower her. Climb the highest tower.

She took my "condition," this changeling disease, in stride, which might've been a surprise if she wasn't knowledgeable about folk medicines and occult arts. I've been swapped, the good woman I was replaced with a ravenous monster.

Whereas I call myself a changeling, she mentions witches who can shift into wolves and a blood-drinker, the izcacus. A demon once caught by the Inquisition in Hungary.

"Besides," the Countess says lightly, looking out into the beautiful day that makes my bones heavy, "you haven't killed anyone, so I think you underestimate your own restraint."

She overestimates my restraint, especially if she were to know how I spend my nights.

"If you need to rest from being outside, don't worry about attending me," the Countess tells me."

Offering a wan smile, I reply, "I think I'll be rejuvenated once night comes."

I already know that as she leaves me, and I enter the comfort of the castle's shadows, I must sneak a note to the Captain.

That night, the Countess screams in her sleep again, but it isn’t her falling sickness again. I come into the room before she can rise to ring the bell. Her beautiful hair is disheveled as she sits up, but she says nothing as she pulls down the covers to let me in. Once I slip into the impossibly soft sheets, she lies down, facing away from me.

“Who’s Anna?” I whisper.

“My eldest daughter,” the Countess replies, keeping her back to me. “She died from fever sixteen years ago.”

We lapse into silence. I’m not sure what to say. A dead husband, a little baby sister, a daughter. Both her parents.

An apology doesn’t mean anything, and to try to relate—I’ve lost my father, my husband, and my little girl—feels hollow, as if I’m trying to equivocate.

Soon, the room is silent except for the fire and her rhythmic breathing.

Now more attuned to being awake at night, I lie there, and typically, my thoughts wander. When I close my eyes, I’m back in that purple room with the moon-soaked woman, as she drifts to me, her bare feet never once touching the ground.

Instead of the elaborate purple dress and silver pins, she wears a gossamer-thin chemise and her brunette curls tumble down to her breasts, her rosy nipples soft and round as she leans above me, and in my vision, I reach under the fabric to circle my thumb over her hardening, sensitive pinkness.

In reality, my other fingers twine in the tangle of my chemise and the sheets, ghosting over my hip bone.

I roll over, so my own back faces the Countess, curling my legs and slipping my hand under the sheets to the crux of my thighs, past the curly down at my pubis. I find my swollen clit.

Midnight.

Midnight. I should go. He’ll be waiting for me.

But her, her...

The Moonlight-Woman.

The Countess.

Mircalla.

Erzsébet.

Come to me, my love. Drink for me. drink. Think of me and let us become whole.

My mind dreamily cycles through fantasies. The room changes to the lantern-lit secret passage, the bedroom where I meet Szabó.

I imagine him clasping my arms and tossing me on the bed, his leather armor scraping against my skin as he tears the white gown off my body and takes me. He ties my wrists to the bed post, grips my hips hard enough to bruise if I were still mortal, and savagely claims me, ramming his thick cock inside my damp entrance as I mewl under him and the wooden bed frame creaks.

I'm already horridly soaked.

Sometimes, I've fondled myself and told myself to think of Lord Silvas. That things would be better, that Mother wouldn't loathe me, if I grew to love him. If I pretended that I'd been good and let him take me and enjoyed it.

Yes, it's mad, but it's the only way I can think of to cope with this delicate membrane between pain and pleasure, shame and happiness.

In the dark of my eyelids, I shift, and I'm the Styrian Countess. I can tell because of how far the window sill reaches up my abdomen—I'm shorter, and the loose hairs in my eyes glow like tallow under the horned moon.

When I look down, I examine the small hills of my knuckles and the dust suspended, illuminated like gold. I turn around and see a man with thick brown-red hair, still dressed in his riding clothes, his tunic and pants black and gold.

I, not-I, remember the last time we made love here in this secret room in the most distant western towel of the castle, and I told him, *I'm being visited by a woman who wants to make me live forever, and I think by the grace of God, I'll accept. But what if my family tries to have me killed for blasphemy? What if they don't see the gift for what it is? Father's temper has never been kind, even toward his daughters; I have the long scars on my back to prove it.*

He had cupped my face that night and kissed me—but not me, this memory-ghost—and I sighed and basked in the apple wine on both our breaths. And he said: *I'm not sure I can join you, my sweet pearl, but I will find a place where you never have to fear harm. Even if it must be a tomb, it'll be the most beautiful one. I'll build it myself, fit for a queen.*

And as we undress together by the silvery bed, I think as I hold his broad hand and set it above my heart: *He would give whatever he can to keep me safe, once I enter the eternal moonlight into my veins. He would die and suffer mortality to see me live.* It doesn't feel fair.

Mircalla. Her lover, her man—

And then I'm back in Lady Báthory's bed, and my eyes snap open and I clumsily pull my hand from my damp thighs.

Shamelessly, I suck on my damp fingers; my arousal tastes like blood. Because it is.

Careful not to wake the Countess or get blood on her sheets, I sneak out of her bed. Were I still mortal, I might go into the hall and try to offer an excuse to the guards. A late night craving for honey cakes, perhaps. Or some sage tea—or even poppy seed tea—to help my dear lady sleep.

Instead, I go to the window and press my fingers against the iron lattices and glass. I close my eyes and concentrate. I don't bother to put anything on my feet.

When I open them, I'm no longer a person, but a cloud, moonlight fog as I seep through the window and pass over the parapet to float down to the floor below.

The castle, naturally, has a series of tunnels behind the walls, as I've found out as soon as I discovered how I could manipulate my own corporeality. Of course, there are the servant passageways, and then there are others. Most who aren't night-creatures like I would need a lantern to navigate the dark and narrow labyrinth.

But the tunnels lead to parts of the castle not accessed as much. I wonder if perhaps even the esteemed ladies the Countess slept with would clandestinely fleet through these tunnels.

So, I make my way, as a glimmer, to the floor below, and I pass through the walls to find a tunnel lit with lanterns, no doubt the considerate work of the Captain. Even if they were out, I'd be able to find my way.

I end up in the eastern part of the first floor, slipping, with two iron handles, open a painting of Eden to enter the candlelit bedroom, which is smaller than mine and, the first time we came, lined with dust; the Countess hasn't entertained guests in this particular room in ages, particularly after her husband died. The sheets on the large bed are a pale gold, and the Captain—Ervin sits on it, facing me fully, his countenance seeming both softer and harsher with the infernal lights on the vanity and nightstand. A hearth, smaller than most in the castle, crackles lowly.

Sliding shut the painting behind me, I tease, "You're still dressed for the day." No helmet or armor except for two leather pauldrons.

"My duty runs late, my lady."

"Please, call me Noémie." I sit next to him and begin to loosen the strap of his left shoulder armor.

I'm not sure I love him, or if I could see us married or with children, if I can even engage in holy matrimony anymore; my saint necklace still hangs from my neck, not burning me. Our trysts are a respite, and the first time we tried, I couldn't get wet enough, so deprived of blood when the Countess and I didn't know how much I needed.

Soon, I learned to gorge myself. And understanding that his livelihood would be endangered if the Countess learned that her handmaiden was sleeping with him, I agreed to meet him in this location.

Ervin has accepted that I have a condition where I menstruate more often than not, and it doesn't bother him. Perhaps he even enjoys the blood, given what he's willing to do with me, but he never says as much, and I don't press him.

After I loose his first pauldron, I set it on the rug by the footboard, and then I move to his other side and make short work of the other. Then, I take one of his hands in both of mine and tug off his thick leather glove, setting it on the nightstand, his callused fingers teasing mine. I then remove the other.

Patiently, he waits, those flinty eyes burning with desire, with me; without a reflection, I only see myself in others' eyes, such as when I peer into his gaze, or the Countess'. His mirror a rheumy gray, her glass dark and inscrutable as the deepest parts of the forest.

"Kiss me," I request, the room smelling of dust, tallow, and smoke, and his mouth falls on mine. The first press is tentative, Ervin's beard scratching

my chin when I lean into the kiss and his embrace, as his hands, so strong but tender, frame my face for a brief moment. My own touch specters over his neck, though I'm overwhelmed by heartbeat, the increasing pulse under my thumb. He tastes of peach brandy and tobacco.

His hand drifts from my jaw to my throat, his touch a pleasant tickle. He cups one of my breasts, and I can't help but smile into the kiss as his coarse fingertips graze my nipple through the thin silk. Still wearing a languid smile, at ease with the smoky intimacy of the room, I shift to sit near the pillows with my legs spread, my chemise pulled past my knees.

Ervin surges to join me, bowing between my legs and lowering close to the crux of me, his breath caressing over my mound. When his tongue laves my clit, I shiver as his tongue strokes circles over it, his fingers pressing against my damp sex, no doubt already bloody with desire. I reach to card through his black hair. As two of his fingers jut into me, he brings me close to my cusp, but I'm not ready to finish.

I grasp both his shoulders, squeezing one so he rises to meet my eyes, his lips dark with my red arousal. I pull him to me, and he gently grasps my elbows as I kiss him and taste coppery salt mingled with smoke, peach, and tobacco.

Pulling farther down his shoulders, I claw at his tunic, trying to get it off. When he tries to help me, I break the kiss briefly to shake my head.

I all but tear off his tunic, barely keeping myself from ripping it. I have to be careful not to show my true strength for fear of hurting him or making him suspect my true condition, which I don't even fully grasp. His torso is well defined, glistening muscle beneath a bed of dark hair, a jagged scar from a sabre slashed above his heart. Gently, I press my mouth to it when I untie his pants, but the sound of his heart threatens to drive me mad as another stab of need almost sends me into a dizzying climax.

Then, getting an idea in my head, I flutter off the bed and on my bare feet. He follows me, his eyes, the color of autumn mist, asking a question.

I guide Ervin to his feet, and when I ring my arms around his neck, he lifts both my legs with his hands, so I straddle him, my feet off the floor, his breeches falling low.

As my lips claim his, he goes forward, and he presses me hard against a tapestry, and I feel the grooves of the stones underneath the portrayal of Eve lasciviously biting into a leaking fig as the horned serpent wraps around one

of her legs, its strangely shaped head achingly close to her open inner thighs.

My shoulders dig into Eve's juice-soaked mouth as my chemise pools at my waist, and Ervin tantalizes me with his tip lightly against my swollen clit.

I shove my hips forward as we swallow ourselves in a kiss, both of us making a mess of noises as his cock plunges deep into my gash, his chest pressed against mine.

As he buries himself in me, my body flush against the rumpled tapestry, I can feel my point sharpening behind my eyeteeth, as I graze the rough skin of his offered throat. The skin under his taut shoulders ripples, and I can feel my eyes dilate, my attention narrowed at the *throomthroomthroom throomthroomthroom* at the juncture between his neck and shoulder.

Losing all coherent thought, before I know it, narrowly miss his neck, but now I'm burying my teeth into his shoulder, tight and muscled. I clamp down, feeling his skin crumple under my teeth and give way. Blood wells on my hungry tongue, as he twitches inside me. While his blood doesn't taste differently from animal blood, it's nevertheless exquisite in a different way; the simple act of it being offered, rather than served on a plate.

He gives a grunt but his thrusts take on a deeper, swifter rhythm. I lap at his wound, suckling at it feverishly as his taste floods me. I bite him harder, drawing as much as I can as I near my crest with every frantic second.

When I pull away, head slamming a little too hard against the tapestry and stones, though it doesn't hurt at all, Ervin spreads his fingers across my throat as I gasp, his blood trickling from my open mouth; he likes when I bite him, but I've never gone so deep before. I fear that I've hurt him and, at best, it'll leave a scar. I've grown used to having scars, but not causing them.

Roving his touch up, he runs his fingers along my teeth, but then narrowly misses the points hiding between my canines.I must keep from biting his fingers as I spill over; I gasp and cry out when my pleasure tumbles through me, unfurling through my body like blooming petals. He replaces his fingers with his lips, blood mingling between and inside us both.

After we're done, the candles simmering low, I lie in bed in my tangled, blood-stained chemise, as we face one another in a lazy embrace.

I really must stop getting blood on my clothes, but then again, the Countess can afford to replace them.

His hand coaxes along my shoulder, and I can only think one horrible, lingering thing:

If only the Countess would touch me like this.

FIFTEEN

7th of April

As the spring thankfully grows cloudy but warm, I grow used to my condition, except—

It's night, I'm sitting on my bed in a plain linen dress while I wait for the Countess to retire, and there's a damned turtle dove in my room. The bird's wings flap on the stones in the corner of the ceiling.

I'm unsure how the little beast even got in here, but I suppose in a castle where people bustle around and open doors and windows frequently, it was bound to happen. Birds fly in and leaves messes the maids clean up.

The last thing I want is for it to shit on the vanity. Or me. That would be very much my luck.

Worse, its blood beats so quickly that my hunger mounts; I ate a few blood sausages early, enduring one guard's comment about the woman who only eats sausages and stew, who eats like a man.

I need more blood, but when I have it, it makes me so virulent that it frightens me. Part of me feels like I'm a deer in rut.

And yet, if I could only...

It's an innocent creature.

But it's only one bird. They make more.

I stand, eyes pinned on the little creature. I stalk over close to the wall, near the blazing hearth. and I press my hand into the wall. Lately, I've realized that there's more that I can do, such as becoming weightless.

Scrabbling up the stones before the dove can dart away, my hand snaps forward and clenches around its fragile body. Panic, its coos bordering on screams, and then, no more, as I twist its tiny neck to end its fear, and, still on the wall, I sink my teeth into its chest, ripping a small hole into its flesh.

Sadly, birds have so little blood, and the feathers are more than annoying. As I bear down, its tiny, hollow bones splinter and echo in my head, and its feathers tickle the top of my gums. Ugh, dear God, but the

blood that does hit my tongue only makes me drink more and more to ensure it doesn’t go to waste.

A thud, and a gasp. I turn my head. There I am, hanging on the wall close to the ceiling with all four limbs like an especially troublesome cat. Zoé. The new water for the basins falls from her grip, the bowl shattering on impact.

The dead bird drops from my stunned mouth with a sick plop. I spit out gray feathers as the dribble of blood spills down my mouth.

We stare at each other for a long time. Her eyes are wide, muscles frozen in fear, and her heartbeat seems to go faster than the dove’s.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” I mutter bashfully.

Her pulse hammers wildly in her neck. If I could only...just a little...

Tears filling her eyes, Zoé shouts, “I have—God, oh God, oh God, guards!” At this hour, the guards are changing out.

From my spot near the ceiling, I start,“Please, I said—”

“G—”

Before Zoé can open my bedroom door, her hands flailing on the wood, I leap across the room and slam into her. I pin down her shoulder as she flies backwards. The back of her head hits the door, and she cries out as I latch onto her neck, her blood rising to meet my teeth as I rip into her, tearing flesh into my mouth to give way to the sweet nectar beneath.

I barely hear her gurgles as she slumps against the wood, and I devour the fountain of blood that spews into my mouth. As her body gives away, I lay her on the floor, broken porcelain cracking beneath her, and drink the life-rain from her, its heat scorching unlike the fireplaces that no longer warm me, because I no longer get too hot or cold.

But this, this rosy flame rolls through me, down my throat, through my heart that feels ready to burst, into my shriveled, dead stomach, until for the first time in months, I’m complete. Whole. Full, but still eagerly draining the blood pumping into me and sizzling all my senses to life.

Only when I’ve taken nearly all her blood, the rest a river on the floor, does the rest of the world soak back into me. The pop and hiss of the fire. Woodsmoke. A bird mournfully singing outside.

Her life scores the front of my chemise. My eyes, unseeing while I fed, come into stark focus, while Zoé’s are open and unseeing.

This young woman, about my age, now gone because of a monster.

I wish I felt worse about it, but mostly, I feel nothing except that physical contentment of having eaten a good, hot meal after not eating for the entire day.

My little wolf, you cannot live if you deprive herself. This was a lesson.

"At what price?" I whisper.

It is paid, nevertheless, and guilt won't bring her back. We kill one bird, two birds, and then time moves on. We move on.

Familiar footsteps echo in the hall outside, and I'm paralyzed above the still-warm corpse, my face caked in drying blood.

The door opens, and the Countess steps in. She goes to open her mouth, perhaps to ask why I haven't come to attend her. Very quickly seeing the room painted red, and no doubt hit with the stench I've grown to love, she recoils, stepping back in horror.

Her eyes fall on me, and I suspect she must see me for the monster I am. Dangerous. Wild. My pupils so wide that my green eyes are black with ecstasy and desire.

She'll leave me, and I deserve it. She'll abandon me like God has. Or perhaps I've abandoned God for the dream-embrace of undead Countess Mircalla and nightly trysts with the Captain of the Guard. A year ago, such carnal exploits would pale in comparison to the throes of worship.

But I think, well, climaxes are rather pleasant, and moreover, maybe like King Solomon pining about one of his many brides, love is my worship.

Put me like a seal over your heart. For love is as strong as death.

My attention falls to Zoé's body. And what is this, the price of this new, horrible love?

The price is paid, little wolf. Men kill for sport. I kill for survival and for love. If they aren't evil, then why are you? And if we are all evil because of sin, why not enjoy it?

The birth of sin isn't our fault. If the gods didn't want Pandora to open the box, there should've been no box. If God didn't want Eve to eat the fruit of knowledge, there would've been no tree.

And why did Adam taste and fall with her? Because he loved her. Because without God, their religion was love, which is, in fact, the most holy state of all.

The seal over my heart, shaped like that violet of a woman ribbed by moonlight. My creator, my sire, my seed.

Quickly, instead of running away, the Countess shuts the door behind her. The noise gets me to meet her eyes, which rake over me, inspecting.

Finally, she speaks with authority: “This will be all right. When they return, I will dismiss the guards, and I will hide this. And you will go to the washroom and remove all evidence of this. Stay in there for over an hour, and then, it will be taken care of.”

I wonder if she and her three old witches can truly carry a body and clean all the blood without detection. Or perhaps she has someone in her employ who specializes in the disposing of bodies, given the recent need.

Stepping to the edge of the pool of blood, the Countess shakes her head as her eyes fall on Zoé, lamenting, “Poor girl.”

And hatefully, I’m jealous of the sympathy. Jealous of the woman I murdered!

Finding my voice, I say to the Countess, “Pray for her, please. When you bury her.”

“I will. She did enjoy reading by the apple tree, so I will give her last rites there.”

Her behavior mystifies me. Though she feels sorry for Zoé, she is treating this like another matter to be fixed when it is only the beginning of a grander problem. Indeed, the Countess has had to bury quite a few victims of one wayward undead creature, and now she has two demons to worry about.

The Countess waits, and I’m not certain for what. No longer self-conscious, I crawl to a stand, wishing I would shake, but I don’t. Numbly, the core of me hot and vibrating, I peel off my dress and toss it into the hearth. I feel the Countess’ eyes pinned between my shoulder blades, and it doesn’t bother me as I stare at the flames while naked as an animal. She’s seen me with blood on me before; but before, it was mine.

I listen close to her heart; it’s faster than normal, but she stays composed.

What’s more is that I don’t crave blood anymore.

Dully, I mutter, “I’m not hungry anymore.”

The smoke of her voice swirls with the fire. “How exactly did you lose control?”

“I told you,” I reply faintly, “what I was eating wasn’t enough. I wish I could say that I didn’t want to kill her, but she made me so furious that my

mind went red, and it was as if a flood that, with my hunger, made my mind blank.”

I’m too aware of the Countess’ heartbeat. I’m the beast. The predator, prey to no one anymore.

My muscles ripple. Never have I felt more alive.

I should kill more. I should be a monster. No more weeping and moaning about being above the fray or having dear, capricious Mother disown me. I’m fortunate, and yet I’m sullied and grieving while the world goes on. Maybe I should make the world grieve with me.

I shake my head. Is this me, or is it the Moon-Soaked Woman?

Zoé was only a young woman of an ordinary station. She didn’t deserve this. I didn’t avenge myself by murdering her.

But can I promise myself that when I kill again—if, no, when it happens—that I’ll kill the correct person? Lord Silvas, perhaps? I would like to taste his blood again, rip my teeth into his beating heart and drain it.

And God, I could do that!

Shame floods me. No, these are evil thoughts. I’m evil, diseased, possessed, wrong, wrong, wrong. Good women keep the peace. Good women forgive.

I’m tired of trying to forgive. What good is being a saint, so I might be lit on fire or decapitated?

I press my hand to my mouth, but it only reeks of blood. The stench is inescapable and worse, despite being full, it only makes me crave more. “God, saints, please bless her soul. Mother Mary, Saturnina...” God, oh God, oh Christ and Mary, help me choose to be good. “God, I don’t know what you’ve decided, but please spare her.”

I’m not sure I want my soul saved anymore because as much as I love God, Christ, and Mother Mary, no prayer has felt as good as a fading heartbeat sloshing down my throat, reminding me that I can feel ecstasy.

You will live forever. You don’t need to worry about damnation. What good has worrying done for you, you pathetic creature?

Is that Mircalla? Or is that me? It must be me, the only woman to speak to myself with such malice. For all I know, Mircalla may be a true demon of Hell, but she’s always spoken sweetly in my dreams.

The Countess says to me, “Come, let us go to the washroom before the guards return. I will have to wait until they arrive to dismiss them for the

night. I'm certain they'll appreciate that."

I face her. "How can you want to be near me? What if I were to hurt you or your daughters?" Perhaps, like the woman in the woods, I should be out in the wild until I forget my own name.

But she hasn't forgotten her name. This woman who I've kissed and lain with in dreams. It comes to me without words: Countess Mircalla of Styria.

The Countess' jaw hardens. "I know you won't."

It's ridiculous, this trust. Irrational. Not like her. A day ago, I would've believed that I'd never eat an innocent maid.

"How can you?"

"Because certainty and faith are better than wavering. Giving up. I won't give up on you. If I don't believe, who will?"

Plaintively, I mutter, wrapping my arms over myself and digging my nails into my shoulders, hard as marble, "Why? Is that it, for your own virtue? Because I'm unsure if I'm worth it."

Her expression is imperceptible, but I notice the faint tremor of her lips. It's taking everything she can to stand over yet another dead body, a woman killed by a night-creature. "Because our duties to each other are reciprocal. You might be my handmaiden, but I'm to take care of you. To give you a safe haven. To be the stone that doesn't wear."

"How can it be safe with me here?"

"Like you said, you are full. Do you have the need to kill now?"

"No."

"Then, we must monitor how long until your hunger returns, and once your satisfaction wanes, we will figure out how to sate you and ensure that you aren't driven to this...frenzy."

I look mournfully at the floor. "Is it really possible to cleanse the stones?"

"Much blood has been spilled here. Births, illnesses, menstruation. It can be done. Now." She sounds exhausted. "Let us get you to the bath. The water will be cold."

"It's all right," I reply, following her. "It won't bother me."

At the door to the washroom, as the torches and candelabra burn high, the Countess tells me, mouth set in a grim line, "I will return then." In the distance comes the creak of leather boots. When she bustles away, I enter the tiled room and shut the door.

The water is neither warm nor cold on my skin. I descend one step after another until I plummet. Entirely submerged in water, I float there, a hair's length near the bottom.

I'm consumed by the thought of consuming again. Chasing Lord Silvas through the halls of his manor-house. Leaping on him, feeling his skull slam against hard stone, digging my teeth into the flesh of his neck.

Lord Silvas, eyes wide in terror, terror of me. My overstuffed heart throbs, and pleasure shoots down my body with the ocean of life now brimming in me.

Knees curled, I plunge my hand between my legs and stroke my swollen clit. Fountains, fountains of blood spewing down my throat and dripping down my throat. Eyes squeezed shut, I imagine my arousal flowering like petals from me.

And then I imagine a kiss full of teeth, but it's not him. It's *her*. My moonlight, my pearl, as we thrash in a sinking bed of blood and roses.

Where are you? I ask Mircally without speaking, as her teeth nip at the hollow of my throat, her nails teasing the edge of my nipple. *Are you better?* She was lonely and hurt, so she went mad in her immortality.

You'll find me when it's right. Stay with Erzsébet. She needs you like you need her.

She has so much more than me.

And yet, she cannot turn into mist or climb walls or live forever, and so much more. If you were endangered, no gun could harm you, and few blades can pierce you, lest they be silver. If you were endangered, you could fly away. In that case, who has the most power?

I rub and run, until I release a silent cry. Sated and yet still wanting, I curl at the bottom of the water for what feels like an eternity, suspecting that the Countess has retired to bed after somehow cleaning up my mess.

However, when I raise my head, my hair floating in dazed spirals around me, she's there rippling above. Those dark liquor mirrors that show me—uncertain, tired, rosy with blood—to myself.

When I emerge, she gives me a towel, and as I dry myself, I ask her, "Do you still think taking me to Vienna would help?" She smells faintly of blood, but she will find no relief because when I look at the bath, it's dirty with my own sin. My lady will surely have me executed in the night. Or the day, most likely.

Archly, the Countess replies, “We leave tomorrow.”

SIXTEEN

9th of April

With the weather, a light rain, the journey on horseback and carriage to Vienna will take approximately four days, perhaps three if we make good time.

“But first,” the Countess tells me as I pace the length of my room, maddened by the blood out of guilt, not hunger, “I must go to the ferries and see how the estate at Devín fares. The citadel there is mine, but I’ve heard of disturbances from the burghers there.”

“What do you mean?” I had asked as I packed my chest alone, folding the green dress the Countess gave me.

“They complained of problems with robbery, and then stopped corresponding with me. I’d like to see how the people and land are faring. I’m loath to take the entire garrison with us, since many have seen this very land, the land of a widow, as ripe for taking.”

“Surely, they won’t take the castle.”

“No. but they pick away at it.”

To my happy surprise, traveling with my newfound condition had only one difficulty, and that’s on the first day, even with the carriage curtains drawn, a harsh fatigue comes over me, and yet it isn’t as painful as it was when I was barely getting by of blood sausages and stew. Nevertheless, I spent most of yesterday dozing, which isn’t so terrible when I’ve always found travel to be tedious, and travel conversation even more so.

Ilona Jo rides in the carriage with the Countess and me, and in the other carriage was Dorko and three maids to care for the Countess’ guest manor-house in Vienna. A handful of guards, including Ervin, ring our company.

I don’t expect much trouble with the Countess’ men being effective in warding off threats, but we’ve stopped, and the Countess has left the carriage. Ilona Jo offers me a consolatory smile and doesn’t stop me when I leave the carriage, too, after a few minutes of nothing.

When the sunlight slams into me, I must keep my back erect and steel myself as a wave of ennui crashes into my body.

We are on the road by the ferry dock, a long, wide bridge where boats wait. The sun glosses the water and rain puddles, the mild storm broken. Behind me, curious maids peek out and listen intently from their carriage window, though I hear Dorko snapping at them to come back in and lower the sash.

On his black horse, Ervin looks across the road at me and motions his head for me to go back to the safety of my carriage. Before us, the Countess stands with a group of about twenty armored, stone-faced men, all on horseback. Closest to her must be the garrison commander, an older man with hair as pale as his gaunt face, which looks as if it was etched from the limestones of the Countess' castle. One of his legs is positioned awkwardly in its stirrup. Gout.

The Countess is saying, "I wasn't aware my movements were known."

"We've been aware that you might come for a while, my lady. You tend to come during this season."

"Hm. Yes. I'm sure that's it." The Countess' voice is lined with venom. "What do you mean that we can't pass? This land belongs to me, as it would belong to any lord."

The garrison commander stares down at her, past his round nose, red with burst blood vessels from too much drink. Shadows line his flat blue eyes. "Under the order of the Bratislava authorities, and the Crown, we cannot have one who is so ambivalent in her loyalties to the King gain passage to these lands. All are welcome in Vienna, so you shall find no resistance there, but Devín has been given to new hands."

"This land is mine by right after my husband's departure to God's Kingdom, and I will have what is mine, good sir." Furiously, she says something in German to him. Not far in my studies, I only understand one word, and it's quite the indecent one, which gives me pleasure. The soldiers nearest to the commander tense. I see one's eyes flare. "For three-hundred years, my family has uplifted this land.

The commander's men have their hands close to their swords. I look at Ervin on his horse, and he too is ready to fight, should there be provocation.

If there is too much bloodshed, I'm not worried what these men will do to me: I worry what I'll do to them.

Nevertheless, no matter how much I try to simper and deny it, I want a fight. Even when I'm not as hungry as I was, I want blood; the thought fills me with ghoulish glee.

The garrison commander holds up his hand to his men, who reluctantly ease. "Yes, but you must consider that you have much land, and it will not bring harm to you if others care for it. As a smart woman, certainly you realize that one lost fortress will not ruin you, especially not one you scarcely visited."

The Countess straightens her back. Instead of heat, every syllable bitten out is pure ice. "I visit my own lands as I please. It is not my fault that the Crown is poor. Perhaps they should find ways to make amends with me, lest they find a man in me! I am no sad widow who will sit and let crows pilfer my rights because of their own follies."

"Our venerated King, the Holy Roman Emperor, speaks for the Lord, my lady. Given the mercurial loyalties of your caste, you would do best not to give him any doubt of your allegiances."

The Countess doesn't waste time. "I cannot see how betraying a loyal servant is the will of Christ. You question my loyalty; I don't see how my loyalty is doubted when it is my generosity being taken advantage of, and all my efforts to uplift the good Emperor have been met with him taking more, rather than giving me back what he promised. A debt he has only because of my kindness. I doubt his most sycophantic supporters have granted him the wealth I have."

"And yet, you did it with the need to be paid back. Is that true generosity, my lady?"

"That is the meaning of a loan, sir. I would hope that the Emperor would take in men who know definitions. But then again, it seems few understand the meaning of this land being granted to me upon my lord's death. How odd that these personal confusions wouldn't come to affect me."

"A widow should be allowed to rest and pray after her dutiful years to her good husband, and in gratitude for your service, the Crown is allowing you to worry about one less property."

"I did not request for my property to be forfeited to beggars who seek to steal it."

"My lady, the Crown doesn't steal. It does as God wills, and that is all."

When the Countess turns, I see the dark scowl playing across her face. Not granting the man the respect of meeting his eyes, she shows him her back. Ever my formidable tigress. "You will know what it means to spurn me. Have no doubt about that, good sir." Lips stretched thinly over her teeth, she adds over her shoulder, "Now, if He would deign to keep you company, I wish you God's grace." And then, to Ervin, she says coldly, "To Vienna, then."

"Yes, my lady," Ervin replies; he hasn't once moved his hand away from his sabre.

The Countess' eyes fall toward the carriage, and then on me. The flicker in her deep brown eyes is exasperated but not unkind, as if she's grown used to my mild displays of impudence, this shamelessness that falls upon me. *Of course you couldn't stay in the carriage for ten minutes.*

Strolling by me, she says, "Come, I would like to get this journey over with as swiftly as possible."

"Yes, my lady," I reply sweetly, batting my eyes. Lower, I add, stepping into the carriage after her to rejoin Ilona Jo, who embroiders a poppy on white cloth. "You certainly won't hear a complaint from me."

When we are settled, and the journey has resumed as if without interruption, I ask the Countess, "How much money does the Crown owe you?" I lean my head against the seat, my eyes hanging low; even with cover, the sun beats through the wood and silk curtains. Blood pounds in me, going nowhere, and yet I know eventually it'll be less, and I'll be hungry again. A week? A month?

"An untoward amount without checking my reckoning book." The Countess scowls. "I am no beggar; they begged me first. *They* owe a debt to me, and they expected that after my husband's death, I would grow meek and stop reminding them of it. They will give me what I'm owed, until God strikes me."

No matter the change in me, I can only think of how I was raised by my mother and my mother-in-law; it's easier to appease. And when I appease, I'm less of the monster I'm becoming.

I tell her drowsily, "Perhaps it would be better to leave it be. The Habsburgs can be vindictive. If anything, I worry what will happen to your family and estate if you keep pressuring them."

She kneads her temple. “I worry what will happen if I teach them that they can get away with not paying back their debt to me. If they won’t pay back a loan, I’m certain they’ll only escalate against a ‘radical’ Calvinist heretic who dared question them.” Darkly, she adds, as Ilona Jo stops embroidering to regard the Countess with sympathy, “They cannot afford to aggrieve me for long with their frivolous little games.”

Ilona Jo says pleasantly, “If you have head pains, I have feverfew and peppermint in my pouch.” Setting her thread aside, she pats the brown bag by her hip.

The Countess gives her an unguarded smile, like one might give to their sweet grandmother, and it makes my bloated heart pause. “Thank you. I believe I shall live.”

The old woman tsks. “Now, I didn’t ask if you’d live. One can live and still have an awful headache, especially when dealing with politics.”

“May I continue speaking?” I ask, intending not to interrupt their conversation if the Countess didn’t want to continue the topic of the Habsburgs.

Both women look at me with amusement, as the Countess asks, “Have I ever stopped you before?”

I start, “The Habsburgs can afford to destroy anyone, even indebted to you. they're the Crown of the Holy Roman Empire. their family...”

The Countess pauses to consider my words. “My family has helped these damned Catholics for generations. They would do well not to spurn their most loyal and influential subjects.”

Ilona Jo pats the Countess’ hand. “If need be, I can always place a curse on them. Perhaps one involving stinging nettles in inconvenient parts, or agitated mice.”

I ask her, “Would the agitated mice go to inconvenient parts?”

She chortles. “Let us hope that things aren’t so dire now!”

Trying to offer good humor, I say wryly to the Countess, “I take no offense at your aspersions toward my faith.” My hand goes to my Saturnina necklace.

The Countess waves a hand. “It isn’t their faith I hate. By all means, think that bread and wine are flesh and blood and worship the saints. Hell, they’ve died badly enough, so someone might as well worship them. It’s their hypocrisy. no doubt they jail those who don’t send them taxes on

time.” She releases a long sigh and shakes her head. “We continue. nothing has changed. I won’t be brought to heel with my tail between my legs.”

I’m not convinced, and neither is she. As much as I admire her armor of resolve, I see the shadows pooling around the lines of her eyes and mouth. “I’m sorry this has happened.”

Her frown deepens. “It’s not your doing. I’m happy to see you’ve been more hardy.” A dark, bitterly knowing smile. “If they truly feared me, they would’ve arrested me and kept me from going to Vienna at all. This is nothing more than an attempt to humiliate me. To make my resolve falter. That’s all. And they’ve failed.”

Despite the pleasant lull of the Countess and Ilona Jo’s company, that doesn’t assuage my fears; if anything, I’m more worried what the Habsburgs will do now that they’ve failed to make her submit.

11th of April

I thought Vienna would look pristine, but when we arrive, only one word comes to mind: haunted. By phantoms. By crimes. By saints.

A light fog drifts like a procession of underworld ghosts over the Danube, the sails on the water looking like white dresses flowing with the lashing wind. On the bridge we cross, statues line both sides. I focus on one, or three I suppose: a dour hooded woman with two angels reaching above her. Then at the end of the bridge, I see that the stone is bordered by two gryphons, their beaks high.

Nevertheless, Vienna is a misted jewel.

Ah, this city, Mircalla whispers in the back of my mind, *northeast of where my bloodline met its doom, extinguished from the Earth, except for me. The last Karnstein.*

Her last words make me sad.

What was the Karnstein sigil? I ask.

A lioness, black as midnight.

Tension stirs in my chest as we ride deeper into the city. The imperial city and seat of the Holy Roman Empire, a mix of gothic and baroque manor-houses, churches, gurgling fountains, cafes, opera theaters, and concert halls, music from violins and ouds, clove-like perfume and coffee. Among rows and rows of white buildings, the sun gleams on turquoise domes.

Despite the morning storm that has passed, people bustle everywhere. The men are in blue and songbird-yellow doublets. The women are in elegant floral dresses with V-shaped necklines, petticoats, and linen jackets, accented with blue-tinted reticella collar, cuffs, and lacy headdresses of pearl. Some of their sleeves are full, silky chemise. Many boast black ribbon sashes.

The many hats are broad rimmed and similarly a deep black in contrast to the rainbow of blues, yellows, and reds. I feel out of place, thinking of the green dress the Countess gave me. In fact, I feel as if all our styles aren't quite as ostentatious and modern.

We pass a clothier with a phantasmagorical array of dresses in the window.

"Those are lovely," I mutter.

Pointedly, the Countess says, stroking her chin, "You do get quite a lot of blood on your clothes. We might need to buy you a new wardrobe every year, at least."

Heat creeps up my throat. "I hope that isn't necessary."

We pass the heart of the Crown's power: Hofburg, the Habsburgs' four-hundred-year-old imperial palace, a marvel of white, gold, and turquoise, with turrets that touch the sky high as Babel and a massive, twinkling fountain before four looming pillars.

We arrive at the Countess' manor-house swiftly. It bears much resemblance to the rest of the architecture with its swooping circular roof and high, green-ringed windows on all three floors. It's relatively simple compared to her castle or the imperial palace, but of course, it's a show of wealth with its own stone fountain and a cage of pillars.

Inside, it's also a picturesque haven of white and gold with shimmering chandeliers like opalescent spiders, enormous hearths, high wood ceilings, Italian-style oak parquet floors, and rows of stained glass windows decorated with painted blue lilies and verdant vines. Whereas the castle is

nearly all angles, the rooms, with their hand-painted silk wallpaper and stucco walls, and stairs are nearly all polished curves. The sharpest points are the diamond patterns on the floors.

The Countess leaves us to go to the palace, no doubt to, at best, beseech the Emperor or his closest advisers. At worst, to confront him. I fear that fire under her chilled persona might be her undoing.

Amid displays of white lilies, I sit in the piano room with its walls painted teal and gold, perusing oil paintings from the *Divine Comedy*: Dante and his ghostly guide—who offers the only focal point of light—talking and strolling through oppressively dark woods; plunging red cliffs; winged monsters; trees of screaming, toothy mouths and bloodshot eyes; frosty planes with frostbitten heads sticking out of the ice before the three-headed Devil.

I admire the balcony, though I keep my distance from the gloomy light slithering on the gold-framed tiles. I can hear laughter and conversation on this floor and below on the ground level. The maids seem to be keeping their distance from me. It’s a shame, and loneliness stews in me. I feel more of a bond with Ilona Jo than I do with women closer to my age.

Ervin went with the Countess, and I wonder if he’ll be expecting me tonight, if he’ll want to worship his palms over my bare hips in the burgeoning rose garden.

For once, I don’t think about sleeping with him, though the increased blood in me pounds even below my navel, as if I’m in that first day of menstruation where I swing between needle-and-pin cramps to persistent arousal.

Yet, all I can think about is the Countess’ promise to take me to a doctor, and the thought of going on a clandestine journey with her into the deepening Viennese night.

As the blooming red roses outside deepen with evening, I hear the carriage return and, with the same cadence as always, the Countess’ sure footsteps.

When she enters, I hear the maids pleasantly greet her, and the creak of Ervin’s armor.

I stand up from the piano stool and clasp my hands above my belly as I wait, finding a dark satisfaction that, as the stairs clack, she’s coming directly to me. I feel the pull of her, her stubborn heartbeat.

She storms through the high arch that leads into the room, and here I am, standing by the piano.

“How did your petition go?” I ask her pleasantly, but even then, I barely hide the teeth of my wit. I can’t help but feel as if I’m the sweet wife greeting my lord as he returns home from war. But with the Countess and me, I feel as if we have a double-sided knife stuck between us. If one of us slips and gets too close, it’ll make us bleed.

She sets her hand on the wood and huffs, leaning a little. “I hate these damn Catholics. Excluding present company.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry it didn’t go well.”

“It went like I expected. It wasn’t my primary reason for coming here anyhow.”

“When will we go to see the doctor? Tomorrow?”

Straightening, she drops her hand, that moment of vulnerability passing. “We can go this evening, if you wish. I cannot guarantee that she’ll have a cure or any true solution. But she may at least offer context and knowledge about your condition.”

I frown. “Perhaps you should rest. Eat. You did just return, and we’ve been traveling for days.”

“Nonsense. I have tonight and all day tomorrow to sleep.”

“I’ve never known you to sleep all day.”

I’m familiar with her. Maybe too much. Even after not even half a year in her constant company, I know her. As bold as it is to say, I’m not even sure she and her husband knew each other so well.

Even at my wedding, when I was too young, such a quivering slip of a girl, so desperate to please, the Countess seemed separate from her lord husband, an entity all her own.

She felt separate from everyone, really, deep inside her own carapace. Before, I would’ve said it was that alleged, mystical dragon-blood bestowed by Christ or the Devil or both.

No, when I came to her castle, didn’t I feel like a ghost? Singular. Lonely.

She says, “I’ll rest when I fall over dead. Now, come.”

“Will we need an entourage?”

“No.”

SEVENTEEN

I worried that two women without a man would be a suspicious sight, and even Ervin had taken pause when the Countess announced that she was taking me to an apothecary alone to find something for my headaches.

Nevertheless, the outpouring of people, heavy as rain, hasn't lessened as the street lanterns blaze and we pass decadent frescoes and statues of teary-eyed saints, eyes and mouths rapt in ecstatic suffering. Despite the exuberance of many of the people around us, laughing and boisterously talking about going to the opera or the orchestra, I cannot help but feel the oppressive, gloomy stares of the rows upon rows of hideously slain saints.

But as the Countess looks ahead without a hint of fear, I find strength in myself, too. As night seeps into my bones, I realize that I have no reason to be afraid. If anything, it's me protecting the Countess. I no longer shy away when carriages pass through, no longer fearing being trampled by the horses.

While the night swarms around every light creaking on the passing carriages and everyone's feet, I see and smell every movement and perfume, all mingled with the damp bank of the Danube to the south.

The apothecary is a dark wall settled beside a winery, its windows curtained with deep mahogany velvet, lanterns burning low past the fogged windows. When the Countess enters without a moment's hesitation, cutting a swath through a cluster of vaguely annoyed loiterers, I struggle to suppress my smile.

Inside comes a storm of different smells, the expected pungent aromas of hundreds of herbs, many dried and collected in several jars on dark oak shelves that line every wall. Clusters of rue hang from the ceiling.

Behind the counter stands an academic-looking woman who surprises me with her white sleeves and black tunic, and dark green trousers. She pauses from her writing to stare at us, eyes slightly wide in recognition as they fall on the Countess.

Her attire doesn’t seem out of place for the head of an apothecary, but I’ve never seen a woman dressed like this. I’ve only ever worn trousers when I was a little girl and it was seen as harmless “pretending” for a year or two.

Her curly hair is auburn and pulled away from her face in a single braid over her shoulder, though wisps hang on her brow, with a single dark, serious crease. Her deep blue eyes are framed by shallow lines and round, gold-framed eyeglasses perched on her small, straight nose. Her face is round, but nevertheless she gives an air of knowledge amid a sort of sardonic playfulness; I imagine she’s much closer to the Countess’ age than mine.

Expression reserved, Valentina says, “Ah, Erzsébet. It’s good to see you again.” Her voice is light as petals on the wind; it reminds me faintly of Mircalla’s, and my heart stirs.

As if she owns the building, the Countess approaches the counter. An invisible wave passes between them, my lady’s countenance shifting. I detect a hint of warmth. “Hello. It’s good to see how you fare.”

“Well.” Valentina leans against the counter, palms outspread on the wood surface. “What do you want, this time?”

Without missing a second or scolding the other woman for her humor, the Countess replies, “I was hoping that you could help my handmaiden with an issue.”

Uncertainly, I tell Valentina, as the attention falls to me. “My name is Noémie.” I must stop myself from nervously clasping my hands in front of my stomach.

Valentina’s eyes rake over me, and I can’t help but feel exposed. She motions for me to move away from the door. “Ah, I see. Yes, you’ve been afflicted, haven’t you? By that special disorder.”

“What disorder is that?” the Countess asks.

“I cannot say it has a name, nor a proper diagnosis. Our modern sciences aren’t quite able to determine such specifics.” She moves away from the counter and to a door at the back of the shop. “Come. Let us go to my lab.”

Ah, so she is indeed a doctor; I’ve never known a woman to be allowed to go to school for medicine. Of course, I’ve never known a woman who’s gone to a university at all.

I imagine a secretive underground lab; I'm reminded of what I've heard about the catacombs under Rome, and I wonder if Vienna also has a labyrinth of ossuaries under it.

Instead, I find a room that Valentina lights, though I don't need the candles to see. Tallow and ink seep into the room, as well as the faint tang of blood. A whiff of fat and olive oil, perhaps used to clean away the smell. A very simple study lined with books and more jars, though I notice that these jars, besides the many chemicals, have whitish powder—bones?—and different preserved specimens. The strong camphorous balsam and quicksilver hits my nose as my eyes pass along jars of dead birds and small animals, as well as different carefully embalmed organs. In the corner of the room is a simple writing desk with stacks of papers and journals.

In the center is a long rectangular table with a pristine cream-colored cloth over it, with a chair beside it, as well as a smaller stand with a tray of various sharp instruments. A handsaw hangs on the wall.

As the Countess remains by the door, I sit in the chair as Valentina goes to one of her leatherbound journals, and I skim over her swirling cursive as she looks over it with great interest. I'm impressed that she knows the exact book to go to.

"How did you become a doctor?" I ask her.

Straightening, hands still on the book, Valentina offers a wry smile. "If you mean how I received a license, I haven't. I'm afraid that, well, many things preclude that option, namely one. But my family has never been one to let rules determine what we do, so long as we're careful about it. I've run my father's apothecary shop, as you've seen, ever since he died. He taught me much, but I had to learn more of the physical remedies and surgery through reading, as not even barber-surgeons can be women because, oh dear, I must keep my soul free from a career of observing others' bodies, lest I be tainted."

I admit, "I crave blood, and it's the only thing that makes me feel full."

As if flicking away a bug, she picks up a scalpel and pokes it above my elbow, and thought the pain is little more than a prick, I start. While little pierces my skin, that does, and I gasp as blood wells there. Without thinking, I reach down to swipe at the bead of blood and bring it to my lips.

"Hm, hm." She nods once. "Yes, there we go."

Even though my skin doesn’t sting, or even mildly hurt, I flinch away from Valentina. “I beg your pardon?”

“Hm,” she says again, as the skin begins to immediately close. “Yes, you definitely exhibit traits of the other hemophiliacs I’ve come across. Silver might not burn your skin, but it can penetrate. be careful not to let anyone try to pierce your heart.”

I reply, “Even in life, I certainly avoided having my heart impaled, silver or no.” The Countess makes a sound like a laugh.

“That’s wise,” Valentina replies nonchalantly, cleaning the scalpel with a towel. “Hm, yes, you certainly have this condition.”

“Hemophilia, you called it.” Love of blood.

“Ah, yes, hemophilia.”

“What made you interested in this study?”

“Oh, I have no special interest in hemophilia. Quite the opposite. Would you believe that despite my professional interests that I don’t like the sight of blood? It’s simply another condition that patients have come to me for. Normally, it’s considered an erotic obsession. Someone has an event that sexually excites them, usually involving the ingestion of blood, and it shifts their psyche.”

Vigorously, I shake my head. “No. There’s nothing like that. I’ve never thought of blood as erotic. It’s not a fetish.” Well, not entirely. “It’s always been...constant and violent.”

“Have you consumed blood before this condition?”

“Yes. But it’s never brought me pleasure.” A lie.

Standing before me and listening, Valentina rubs her chin thoughtfully. “Admittedly, I have difficulty grasping this compulsion to taste blood, but it’s something to study like anything else.”

“It’s more than a compulsion. When I ate only blood sausage and stew made of cow or pig blood, it wasn’t enough.”

The doctor presses, “The amount, or the kind of blood?”

I think about it, not entirely sure. Animal blood doesn’t taste differently than human blood, and yet... “Both, I think.” I can feel the Countess watching us both in the corner like a shadow, as much as the curious scientist as Valentina.

The doctor lowers her hand to her side, nonplussed to be in the same room as an undead creature. “To take someone’s blood is a means of power.

If we feel like we lack control, we might take unorthodox means to rewrite that instance so we then seize power."

My jaw hardens. "This isn't a choice."

"I never said we fully control what our mind wants us to do. It's quite an uncharted field. And the mind is, like the heart and stomach, another organ."

"I was bitten, attacked by a woman in the woods."

She crosses her arms. "What did she do, specifically? Bite you? Let you bite her? I've heard different accounts, though it's quite fraught remembering such a harsh event. Did you feel your heart stop? Do you believe you died?"

"I *did* die. She gave me her blood before she drained me, and it stained my soul, and now I dream about her. Not of where she is now." I can't say where Mircalla is now. "Her past."

"Patients with your symptoms have also mentioned dreaming about others. Strangers they come to know well in sleep and ruminations." Know well. Yes, I've known her. "Do you find that you have erotic feelings for women? Many suggest childhood trauma bring those feelings, such as a man's violence causing a distaste for all men."

I cannot help my ire. "Did your chemicals give you that conclusion?"

I don't believe her. Regardless of what modern science or the Church says, there was no great trauma that made me kiss another girl when I was young. It was simple. Pure. That memory under the apricot tree is one of my few untainted memories. Not forced on me, unlike this insatiable thirst.

And Lord Silvas' actions didn't influence my decision to kiss the Countess, or to fuck the Captain. Were he never in my life, I can see myself doing those things.

No, this condition is entirely different, only similar in that loving both men and women and being undead puts me on the periphery of most human experiences. But they aren't connected like the doctor suggests.

Firmly, I grip both sides of the chair. "My condition has nothing to do with any of that. None of those matters are a question of holiness or unholiness."

She raises her chin in brief affirmation. "From an enlightened perspective, I'm inclined to agree. The Church wouldn't, nor would most of society."

“It’s something that’s afflicted my soul. I’m not, I’m not alive anymore.”

Valentina looks down at my throat, where blood pulses under a cool expanse. “Of course you’re alive. A corpse can’t speak. Have you had a change in sexual appetite since your condition?”

Annoyed, I stiffen. “Why are you asking me these questions? It isn’t a fetish. I’ve already told you, and I would like you to listen.”

“Based on previous, admittedly rare clients that share your symptoms, after drinking blood or having one of their dream-visions, they report an increase in sexual urges that they otherwise wouldn’t partake in. Have you had a similar experience?” She idly tugs on one of her stray curls.

The bold part of me, engorged and snapping its teeth, tells me to answer her honestly. what can I lose by indulging her, my life, my soul? Even if I humiliate myself in front of the Countess, well, it’s nothing that hasn’t happened before, and it won’t ruin me. I’ve been ruined a hundred times, and still I stand.

So, I tell the truth: “Yes, I slept with a man shortly after. I hadn’t wanted that in a long while.”I feel the Countess’ eyes on the side of my face, but I don’t look at her, as much as I want to scrutinize her reaction. “And something else I’ve noticed is that my arousal is blood.”

If the revelation fazes her, Valentina doesn’t show it as firelight plays on her glasses. “It makes sense if blood has replaced every other fluid, such as tears. You said that human blood fills you more than animal blood. Humans are animals, so indeed, it might be preternatural and outside of my expertise. I’m not especially interested in metaphysics. I’m unsure of the contents of human blood versus animals, and I’m afraid current equipment is lacking. Though perhaps there’s a component stronger in a person’s blood. I’m guessing like others, when you eat regular food, it seems to disappear from your body with expelling either way. This should be impossible, since matter doesn’t simply disappear.”

Then, the Countess speaks, “I think if Noémie is having dreams about her attacker, there might be a spiritual connection. A bond created by death.” The way her contralto voice dips when she says my name never stops sending a chill down my back.

Valentina gives a cheeky smile to my lady. “Trying to get off the topic of certain biological matters, I see.”

“Nonsense.” Her voice has a curt edge. “Out of everything that’s been brought up in your prodding, I daresay Noémie having this otherworldly connection with the woman who killed her and others concerns me the most. I grasp her need for blood; I don’t grasp this.”

Lowering her chin, Valentina purses her lips in contemplation. “When it comes to paramours, it certainly takes the Grecian idea of a ‘soulmate’ very literally. Again, you can’t mix chemicals to get a solution to observe the mind or grind this sort of bond into a mortar and pestle to see how it works, so I can’t say much to alleviate your concerns.”

“It doesn’t frighten me,” I tell them both, trying to determine the Countess’ temperament under her frosty exterior. “Mircalla...” That seems to catch them both off guard. “Mircalla doesn’t intend me harm, and I don’t think she’s hunting anymore. At least, not as terribly as she was.” It’s as if as my soul calluses, a shell hardening over my heart, hers softens. Remembers itself. Herself.

After a pause, Valentina says, “I see. Well, if there’s nothing else, I’m afraid like all those before you, I have few suggestions.”

“Where are others like me?” I ask her.

“There are some in the city, but of course, they are more active at night. I suppose the truest answer is here or there.”

“Which is the oldest you’ve met?”

“A gentleman who lived to see William the Conqueror rule England; he was born in 1035.” I stare. “They are not quite as obvious as you might think. Or unnatural. There are many animals and creatures who also drink blood. The leech, the flea, or certain kinds of bats.”

Plaintively, I ask, though with a touch of bitter humor, “Is that what I am? A large leech?”

Valentina pats my shoulder. She fascinates me. “Oh, don’t feel so aggrieved. A leech is not an inherently dirty or evil thing. It is merely another part of nature, coming into its role like a wolf learns to eat foxes and rabbits. Certainly, we use leeches in medicine, but one might think of a flea and ask, ‘What good does it do? It steals blood and spreads disease.’ But when we destroy and kill and give others plague and famine, we don’t ask, well, what good are we if we only hurt other creatures to thrive?”

The Countess argues, “Fleas don’t have art and literature.”

Valentina hums. “True enough, but they also don’t have ships, swords, and guns.”

I press, “I’m sorry, but my question was lost. Is that a yes or no?”

The doctor gives me a wry grin, and I decide that despite my outward ire, I like her. “No, you are quite a bit more than a leech. But I do have something for you. A powder that might help when you eat food with blood in it. The issue is that blood congeals very swiftly, but this will keep it potent and liquid longer. Hopefully, it’ll keep you from doing anything that you might regret. And don’t worry, based on others’ experiences taking it, I haven’t put in any crushed garlic.”

“Good.” I suppress a nervous smile. “I look so forward to more potent stew and sausage.”

Back at the manor-house, rain begins again, light but persistent. My room on the second floor, near the Countess’, is a giant, elegant blue lily. As the fire roars, I stand on the pearlescent balcony, clutching the marble, as hard as my palms.

Of course, I hear the Countess, even in her satin slippers. She enters my chambers and stands at the footboard of my bed as I remain on the balcony, looking out into the garden as the wind and sprinkles of rain disturb my hair.

“Have you tried the mixture Valentina gave you?”

“Not yet. I still don’t feel the hunger as pressing as it once was.”

“You said you were with someone. That you have a lover.” Ah. Always one to cut to the quick.

“Yes.” I won’t say Ervin’s name and compromise his station. I’m not sure if the Countess would dismiss him, but I made a promise to him. I may be a harlot, a creature, a monster, but I’m no oath-breaker. “Have I offended your sensibilities?”

“You must have a dire opinion of me to think that would offend me. I didn’t know you loved someone else.”

Someone else. How presumptuous.

Is it a wrong presumption?

“I don’t. That person brings me pleasure. After what I’ve been through, I wasn’t sure it was possible, but now I feel more like myself.” The oddest thing about that statement is that “myself” isn’t who I thought I would be. She is strange, morbid, and frightening.

“Do you plan to go to them tonight?”

“No. Do you want me to, do you want to watch, like I watched you?”

Predictably, she doesn’t balk. “I can’t say that I do. It seems between your real lover and your feral, undead dream-lover, there might not be much room left.”

“Oh,” I urge, “there’s always room for one more. Did you and Valentina ever kiss each other?”

“What makes you ask that?”

“The way she looked at you. I was only curious. How did you meet her?”

“We met on one of my trips here. That’s all.”

I face her, then. She’s wearing a chemise, but she has a dark violent silk robe over it and tied with a sash. It matches the loose ribbons of her stunning blackbird hair. “Were you lovers?”

“I don’t see how that matters.”

“So, you were. Was it while your lord was away?”

“Would that be so terrible? How did you put it—would it offend your sensibilities?”

Indeed, I was once incensed about the Countess having lovers because of what I was deathly, irrationally afraid to admit: it wasn’t her actions; it was my exclusion from them.

“Thank you for taking me to the doctor. I will use what she’s given me. Now, I would like to go to the Augustinian Church alone. I think it will do me good as I reflect on my condition.” I don’t have any illusions that a prayer, even in the most devout of places, will spare me from my damnation.

God, do You still love me? You must’ve planned this. Made me what I am. Like You made the Tree of Knowledge, and we say that it was free will that made Adam and Eve fall, made Eve the tempting whore. And it was You who made the loveliest angel betray You and fall, and yet, You still

love him and allow him in Your Kingdom when you discussed testing Job's faith.

Does the devil ever think of his work as proof of his love for God?

Even as a devil, I am blessed. More to the point: Perhaps being a devil was Your way of blessing me.

The Countess frowns. "It's not a good idea for you to go alone."

"I could ask the Captain to come with me, but somehow, I don't think I'll be threatened."

"Please. I wasn't saying that *you'd* be the one in danger."

"Do you truly think I'll go on a bloody spree? Do you trust me so little?" Noémie, she did see you covered in the blood of someone you killed.

"Not a spree, but I worry. You are devout, and I worry what the incidents that have already happened will do to your heart, if you'll be ridden with guilt for an eternity. And while I certainly don't want more death, I think we both must accept that there will be more, and we must ensure you are at least moderately well-fed, so you don't become like the creature in the woods that attacked you."

She didn't attack me; I asked her. I asked her to take me because of my guilt, because I knew my silly, rash feelings for the Countess were folly, disgusting, wrong, impossible.

I recklessly showed my ardor and my lady very responsibly rejected me, and I deserved to be rejected because I sought to shame her for her pleasures when I knew how she strove to keep her lands organized and peaceful—and in the end, my concern should never have been *her* so-called shame.

It should've been mine.

Oh, how I ran. My denial, my denial that rather than running and grousing about her sin, I wanted to be on the other side of the door.

Now, after dying, it all feels ridiculous. What does it matter that I fuck Ervin and crave the woman who turned me and the Countess?

I say, "If I stopped existing, the deaths would cease." I don't want to die, but it's merely a fact.

"I'm not entertaining that option."

"Neither am I." Death feels horribly boring now. God wants me to be this way, to be a monster brought back like Lazarus. So, why should I brood

and lament? “What will you do, offer me people to feed upon? To potentially kill?”

“No. However, if you were to go out and end the life of a scoundrel, perhaps a raper, I wouldn’t cry myself to sleep. Would you? In fact, if we were at home, it’d make my work easier, and the land would sleep easier.”

Home.

“I don’t know. I can’t pretend that when I didn’t kill Zoé that there wasn’t some satisfaction in being full for once, but I can’t stand—I can’t stand that I took her life, even if she’s in Heaven. It wasn’t my place.”

“Who’s to say it’s the place of any person to kill? God decided who should be killed in the Bible, and He’s decided what will happen. I suppose then, therein lies a paradox: Only God has a right to kill and has made murder a sin, and yet if he has fated everything to happen, it was always supposed to happen like this. So, we must trust that this is how *you’re* supposed to be, and we can’t run from it.”

I hate to admit that I agree, to my own shock. I want to hate myself more, to be brooding and burdened with the shame that kept me tame all my life.

I don’t. With eternal life, I can live; I can be selfish; I can be free.

After years of worrying about everyone’s opinion and wellbeing but my own, after resigning myself to a loveless life of marrying my own raper, goddamn it all, I deserve to be wild. I deserve my teeth, these teeth I asked for from Mircalla, who, even in her delirious, feral haze, listened to me.

This is the price of your freedom. Is it worth it?

Yes, Mircalla. It is.

I meet her eyes, and despite the coolness of the night, the space blazes between us. “I’ll be back, and I’ll be good.”

Her mouth tightens for a moment, eyes bright with something unnameable, and then she offers a nod. “Be certain of it. Come back to me.”

“I...” I pause. My next words feel heavy. “I will. I promise.”

Without another word, in only my chemise, I wordlessly ease up on the marble lip.

Not stopping me, The Countess watches in silence as I climb off the balcony and leap into the sparkling Viennese night.

EIGHTEEN

The starry, opal-streaked night sky brings me ecstasy, making me feel as drunk as when I drank too much wedding brandy. High above, meteors stitch glittering roads into the tapestry of stars.

Musicians strum lutes and ouds from alight windows while the blue shadows of the highest white and gold church tower sink over me. I can feel the warmth thrumming inside.

Before I can enter, a scream pierces the air. Because of my ability to become smoke, to cut across time with a speed I never could've conceived of as a mortal, I shift and find the disturbance easily: a man with skin so wan he looks like a ghost, or a risen skeleton from the ancient crypts of saints ringing the city like poppies.

He's pounced on a young woman in a black habit who does her best to wriggle out of his broad grip. She clatters on her stomach with him on top of her.

Slicing across the misty courtyard air, I leap on his back and knock him off her.

He releases a startled shout, but he doesn't have long to scream for his pitiful, useless life before I drag him under me and surge my open mouth to the feverish pulse in his throat, clamping around it and tearing away a chunk of flesh like a rind off an orange.

Then, I plunge, and though I don't have that immediate hunger, relief floods through me as the hot tang of blood soars on my tongue.

I don't need to feel guilty here. He deserves it.

The first time I lift my head to bask in the thrumming fulfillment and arousal hammering inside me, I meet frightened brown eyes, wide as bowls. Despite the roar inside me, hitting my skin and bones like a storm and making me drunk on desire, a drop of concern spills into me.

But of course, she sees a blood-soaked woman, if that. A monster who might hurt her.

Before I can say anything to her, she flees.

After the man's dead beneath me, reeking of sweat and acrid cologne under a ruined silken jacket, I wait for the nun to scream for help, for people and lights to flood.

No one.

So, I continue feeding in deep, savoring gulps.

When I'm done with him, I laugh while his life, now mine, drips from my mouth. I have a saint around my neck, and here, as a killer, as a predator in a long white gown, this is the closest I'll ever look to a divine martyr. Once, the thought might've made me sad.

No. Unlike a saint, the blood I'm bathed in isn't mine.

Or, I suppose, it is; I've claimed it.

In the end, I roll his body into the claws of rose bushes and, without a thought to the blood smeared on my face, arms, hair, and clothes, I stand fully and make my way, again, to the gilt door of the church.

Inside, the entire room is a long, narrow arch with what must be a hundred pews. The still-burning chandeliers brood over mosaics and statues of stern and weeping angels and saints amid lingering rosy perfume and frankincense.

But what captures me most is what waits on a small golden dais, bandaged with vermillion rugs, etched with golden lilies.

I'm not in the church anymore. I'm in a cave where I can hear water rushing outside.

Not only a cave, no.

I'm in a dim tomb that smells of wood, resin, and cloves, like the spice of carnations, mingled with earthiness and bitterness. A golden coffin, which sprouts poppies and roses that snake toothy vines all over the stone floor, sits above, but that's not all.

Her. Mircalla, in a soft blue robe, the cloth a sky-corona around her bed of pale curls.

I go to meet her as she waits, standing at the head of the grave as I step into it, and she joins me, raising her long legs under the taffeta robe—nothing else beneath—and straddling me as I lie down to mold my body to the bed of roses lining the whitewood.

As she tucks my hair behind my ears, I ask her, "Have you made me a devil?"

Leaning in, Mircalla presses a kiss to my nose. “We are God’s wolves. Like Christ invited his people to drink of him, acting like a mother wanting to feed her kin. He said, ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.’ He wanted all his most worthy followers to have eternal life.”

“That’s not what he meant. He meant the souls in Heaven.”

Eyes half-lidded, she murmurs against my temple, “Who can say what all of it means? We can argue until the world ends. What does it mean to you?” My eyes fall to the swell of her breasts under the waves of her robe. She straightens and laces her fingers on the crown of my head. “My sweet wolf, look how your eyes and teeth gleam. Drink from my bosom. Come and join me for all eternity. I’ve made you an angel.”

“Please.” I rake my fingers down her throat, dipping them into the creases at the hollow of her throat. “Let me in.”

Partially sitting up, petals tickling my palms, the tips of my eyeteeth nick the skin where pink and sweetcream, meet. That flesh pale as funereal lilies. She cries out.

I open my mouth and, parting the soft fold, press my teeth against the plane of flesh above her heart. As I bury myself into her skin, it isn’t hard as stone. No, it crumples under my devotion, as I lavish my tongue in her as her blood enters my prying mouth.

The roar of her unlife inside me is like the entire ocean. I deepen my kiss, tasting more and more of her, until I raise a hand to finger past her ribs, as her entire body heaves.

“A piece of my heart is in you, go on, taste me, my love. Taste me.” My chemise falling off one shoulder, I part my legs and gasp when her heat settles against mine. As Mircalla strokes her fingers over my throbbing, too-sensitive clit, raging like an artery, I sink my teeth into her pounding heart. It rises to meet my tongue.

Fuck me. Enter me. Be me.

Then, Mircalla hitches my nightgown to my waist and rubs her bared pubis against mine, and I buck my hips in rhythm with hers, our legs tangled as our bodies graze our hot, wet cores.

As she rubs her swell to mine, and mine hers, my completion comes swiftly, so full that it’s almost painful. We erupt, our bloody climaxes leaking as one red stain. There’s little difference in our drenched sepulcher. A tide falls between us as we thrash together.

Desperate to prolong my completion, I reach up and wrap my arms around her and pull her close, her breasts, her temples, her healing heart flush against me.

Then, we sit twined. Undone, I bask in our rose-tinged worship, delighting in being able to caress her feather-soft hair.

My maker. My savior. My saint.

With Mircalla, I’m safe and young and alive. the evidence of our horrid love sloshes around us

I want to be one with her forever.

But it isn’t only her.

Countess.

My lady.

Erzsébet.

Mircalla’s long eyelashes flutter as her lips fall close to mine. “Go on. Go to her. I don’t mind.”

I’m tired of restraint, but...

“It would never be rational.”

“My love, look at where we are. What we are. Let us all have eternity together. The world can be cold and cruel, but love makes it warm, like my paramour who built a tomb to keep me safe. Don’t we deserve that?”

The Countess.

She’s thinking of me. Waiting for me. Pining.

She’s at war with herself. There are many reasons she shouldn’t, in her position, make overtures to her own handmaiden. The distance between our ages. Her friendship with my mother. An abuse of power.

But if we were to be immortal together, what would the difference matter? Now, I’m not the powerless, sullen daughter in a declining family of petty nobles.

I can pass through reality by becoming smoke, and I feel my own wings when I do. A bat? A bird? A dragon? If I wanted, I could drink and kill whoever I please. I can jump off high towers and break bones with a mere

gesture. Knowledge sinks into me about the past, Mircalla's past and what she knows.

It can't happen, even with what I am. Perhaps especially because of what I am. What will I do, look the same forever and be with Erzsébet until she dies? I don't know if she'd want the eternal gift, not with the cost.

Mircalla nuzzles my cheek. "You should go to her. You can't truly know unless you speak with her."

"She'd be mortified to see me like this."

"Hm, I don't think so." She grins. "After all, little wolf, she's seen you soaked in blood before, and she didn't run away."

When I climb on her balcony, the door is open. I pause at the entrance, as late into the night, the Countess, still in a startlingly white chemise under a satin black robe, brushes her own hair, fidgeting with the parts she's already gone over. She's partially obscured by a wooden divider with four panels painted with blue hyacinths, and the room smells of the woodsmoke and tallow of the hazily burning candles and hearth.

Even without my reflection or a word, the Countess pauses and shifts, her eyes falling on the mirror, on the absence where I stand at the threshold.

She rises and, turning, sucks in a deep breath when she notices me.

I imagine what she must see with my chemise now crimson as one of her more regal dresses. Drenched in the blood of murder and eternal love, all in one night.

"Ah." A shiver in her voice, a steadying hand on the vanity. "I see that you've been busy." I try to capture the shape of her feelings, but she's elusive as always; her heartbeat is steady.

Hoarsely, I murmur, "I promised you that I would return to you. I didn't promise that I'd be good."

"Please tell me that whoever you killed deserved it."

"I saved a nun from being raped."

She nods, straightening. "Yes, then. Did you hide the body?"

“I put it in the rose bushes. I didn’t quite feel like carrying it to the Danube.”

“I suppose that won’t end us, but did the nun see you?”

“She did, but I doubt she pieced together who I am, with me being especially disheveled and bloodied.”

“Yes.” Her eyes flicker up and down me, eyes and mouth drawn, and I fear that she will decide that I’m too much of a monster to let in. I’ve gone too far. Left a body in the city.

If I wanted, I could step into a building I’ve already been in before, but I want her to let me in. We have an ignoble bond that, to me, exists not in the sacred or profane, but in a plane beyond Heaven and Hell. That said, I want her to say, *You are a monster, bathed in blood. Sinful and repulsive and whorish. Grotesque. Good. I love you. Come inside.*

I wait, and the minute crackles.

The Countess’ husky contralto is measured and as smoky as the fire in the room. “Well, don’t let the draft in. Come in, and shut the door.” Her tone carries that light humor, the exasperation, as if it’s obvious that I should come in.

I step into the room, coming close to the turquoise, rose-stippled bed canopy.

Like she’s inspecting my handiwork, Erzsébet cups my face, tracing circles into my jaw. And I think that I might kiss those parted lips again, and we’ll consummate our bond, and with that, the night will be consummate. My lovers and I can hunt together.

I'm no maiden; I've been with Miklos, and I was with Ervin. I’m not sure if my rendezvous with Mircalla truly happened. Despite them, I feel as if I don't have much experience at all. My need, my arousal, has outpaced my knowledge.

I wonder what Erzsébet will teach me.

“Édesem,” she murmurs, and my eyes prickle, heat flooding my chest while gaze down at her and raise my hands to graze her elbows.

I ask her, “May I call you by your name?”

“If you wish; I’ve dreamed of it, what it might sound like on your lips. Your mouth would move, your breath like a ghost, but I couldn’t hear it.”

“Erzsébet.”

Her eyes open up, as if a storm has passed.

All relationships are a tug and push, like waves, but after marrying Miklos, I didn’t want love to be a fight. I wanted it to be like a garden full of tulips, poppies, and the hammers and strings of cimbaloms, colors draping the spartan room of my duty.

So, what is this, duty? A handmaiden’s duty to her mistress, as her mistress? No. But then, it may be better for someone in the castle to think us lovers than to suspect what I am; if I'm tied to something unnatural, some sort of witchcraft or demonic possession, I'll be tied to a pyre. I don’t know if fire can kill me, but I’d prefer to avoid that test.

"Is this it, after all these months? Are we really meant to go on and pretend I'm simply a normal handmaiden to the rest of the world? Me, so bloodstained."

"I certainly wouldn't want to do my own hair."

"God," I mutter. My hands rise and rove over her knuckles. “Am I too sullied? Too monstrous?”

“Sometimes, we need monsters to protect us. I imagine it’s irrational, but I think I sleep easier knowing that I can’t lose you like I’ve lost and grieved everyone else, so many times. And it’s as if you’re my...”

“Your wolf.”

The wolf and the lamb shall graze together. Like the devil worked with God to lead Job to righteousness, God and His servants need wolves as much as they need lambs. People might not want wolves to guard lambs, but God has made wolves of those meant to protect and change through violence. Even Christ would’ve risen a sword against the Romans.

“Yes,” Erzsébet whispers, eyes half-lidded in thought; they fall to my mouth. “Do you think your feeding is always painful, even if you don’t bite deep enough to kill?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it true that it brings you pleasure?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think it could be mutual?”

I consider it. I thought the metallic smell of the blood would repel her, that she would command me to bathe.

Instead, her breathing and heartbeat quicken, as if intoxicated by the heady twining of blood, vanilla, and smoke.

Mircalla did like when I bit her, but she's like me. I'm afraid I might go too far and scar or kill Erzsébet.

"What is it, my lady?" I inquire.

Erzsébet releases a scoff and moves to bend over by her bed, lifting the sheets. "Oh, returning to that so soon after calling me by my name?"

"Are you not mine?" I counter, voice strong, and she shifts to look at me with those imperceptible eyes.

And I'm yours. I'm your beast. Your monster. Held so tenderly between your hands. With me, you're safe; you're the only safe one.

Her hand slides under the mattress, and she pulls out her knife, unsheathing it. It gleams with fire.

The air simmers, and she presses her forefinger to the blade.

This is dangerous.

I don't want to kill her.

Her faith in me keeps me frozen. Her assurances, even after finding me wild and sated over a dead body. Mircalla's assurances that this is how it should be. My own need to tell myself that everyone can be damned, so long as I can conquer my desires.

Blood. Sex. Love. Revenge. The best saints and heroes of God worship Him by bleeding and shedding blood. Christ showed his love for humanity by offering his blood and flesh and enduring the stakes driven through his suppurating hands.

Blood wells on her fingertips. Perfect, shimmering drops of the most beautiful, full red. Garnets. "I trust that you won't kill me. And if you do, it had better be like the best coupling I've ever had."

She's safe with me. I have to tell myself that. I need to rein in the ravenous wolf.

"From your dead husband, or your lovers?"

She idly holds her finger out to me. "You're incorrigibly obstinate, aren't you?" The neckline of her chemise dips low, revealing half her generous breast. "And tempestuous."

Gently, I place my lips around her fingertip, careful not to prod her skin with my teeth.

My gums throb. Dear God.

When I'm done, leaving the small slash. I watch her.

Spots of red blotch her cheeks, but her next words are flippant. “How do I taste?”

“It’s like licking a gulden,” I tell her.

“I suppose I can at least say I taste like silver, then.” Metallic, yes, like everyone, since all the bloody meals I’ve had—the stew and sausage—taste the same.

But this feels different. Potent.

As I drank, I wasn’t focused on whether she tasted good. It was as if I entered an ecstatic trance, like some of the hagiographies speak of when a many-winged, many-eyed angel descends from Heaven to speak to a saint.

In that moment, I was nothing and everything, torn apart and made anew. I was a hungry animal, but drinking from her sublimated any wildness in me. Ceased to make me think of who I am, all those fears about how she'll see me and what I’ll become. It had been quiet and reverent.

We are one. One bloodline, one rhythm, one heart.

Now, it’s over, and she returns to her work as if nothing substantial happened. My belly burns, sloshing with what small amount of blood I took. It feels like I took an ocean from her. The pulse of her swells turgid and slow in me.

She takes my stained fingers and kisses them.

God, I know You are a jealous one, but so am I. Don’t loathe me for loving eating her as much as I love eating You.

As I reach down to cup her jaw, my lips fall on hers.

NINETEEN

We clumsily entangle ourselves, our hands grappling against our chemises; my own is stiff from dried blood. As I deepen the kiss, and she lets her bottom lip rub against one eyeteeth until we both taste blood, Erzsébet guides me to the side of the bed. Pressing flush against her, I feel her pause against the jolted bed, her legs knocking against it until we tumble over.

Erzsébet palms at the front of my ruined chemise and drags me flush atop her. I must bend a little when we kiss, and defying her with her vanilla and smoke on my lips, I sit up, my hips gliding past hers as I petal her dress upward and fling one leg over hers.

When she arches her hips forward, I see the dark hair below the plush of her stomach. And the core of her, already glistening.

She helps me peel off the chemise, another scrap for the fire. Her warmth close to mine, swollen and pulsing, as I lightly graze my nub against hers, and her hands fly to meet mine at our junction, and we collide in a kiss as we hastily rub each other. She glances her bottom lip across one of my eyeteeth, so we taste her together.

After we collapse in bed, I curl my legs to myself to keep my bloody arousal from staining more of the sheets, and I see that her hands are red. She doesn’t seem to mind; after all, I haven’t cleaned myself off. I’d say it’s inconsiderate, but she seems to like it as we lie side by side.

Though I don’t need to sleep, I drift in and out of consciousness, in a pleasant haze.

Erzsébet presses her palm against my neck, finger threading around the side, where the pulse of my blood—hers, ours—languidly throbs in wait; at her expectant gaze, I gently wrap my hold around her wrist and draw the tip of her finger to the corner of my mouth, then the center. I loosely clamp myself around her, basking in the copper tang mingling with the tallow and woodsmoke.

She’s still in her rumpled chemise, and teasingly, she rolls over.

As I undo her black sash, I lave my tongue in hot circles where her shoulders meet. Her muscles tense, and she unleashes a gasp, almost in frustration at my slow teasing. I run a finger and form a fist in her half-revealed linen chemise. In my haze of need, the hum in my ears, it feels as soft as silk, and so does her skin while I shed the rest of her robe and tug it down the contours of her body.

With the impatience only borne from a woman who commands the world, she assists me in carelessly sentencing it to the gilded flower-tiled wood. So, back to me, she's only in her chemise, and when she swivels to face me again, nails digging into my neck and jaw, I can see the round, pink outlines of her nipples.

Erzsébet smothers me again with her lips and teeth, the smear of rouge and merlot a musky and sweet taste, filling my mouth with cherries and chocolate. Though I never hunger for normal food, I enjoy that exuberant fragrance, coalescing with the smoky scent of her hair, a loose strand caressing my collarbone as we kiss. My fingers clasp her chemise, but before I have the chance to unmask her, she breaks the kiss.

Her touches don't stop, and rather than my usual inability to feel strong temperatures, my recent feedings awakens a deeper sense of feeling while I still feel the twinging echoes of my first climax of the night.

I shiver when her fingertips tingle my hip, my ribs, my shoulder. Her fingers graze my back in lightning friction.

And then Erzsébet rises and leans over me, hair on my cheeks, her vanilla perfume overwhelming, and I wonder for a second if she's imitating a ritual from some occult text, where a creature bites the neck of a human. I shift, so I rest on my belly, exposed to her.

Erzsébet presses her nose into my spine and breathes in deeply. It takes all my restraint not to squirm in her embrace as she joins me again, so we rest facing one another.

I press a hand to the side of her bosom, where it swells under my palm with each breath, each pump of her life. She cups my breast.

"Are my hands still cold?" Erzsébet murmurs, as a nail trails along the side of a hardening peak.

Her thumb roves over my areola, her dark eyes intense and eating the entirety of me in the honeyed liquid chalice of her stare. I shut my eyes for a moment and enjoy the sting of pleasure. But, ever obstinate and not

wanting to remain idle, I reach across to feel her through the white linen. Her breath hitches for a second, but then the rheumy sea-fog of arousal shifts into something sharper.

“No, my lady, ” I whisper. Mine.

“Is that all you have for me?” Erzsébet rasps, and then I slip my palm down and reach for the hem of her chemise.

Slipping inside it, like reaching to pull an embroidery needle through, I rumple the linen up near her hip and find where her thighs meet, pressing warmly together and pulsing; I can almost taste their wetness, both of blood and arousal when my thumb grazes along the coarse hairs there and then stalls only when I brush against her swollen nub.

The ministrations along my breast pause, and Erzsébet releases a soft croak as I lean forward to kiss the hollow of her throat, raking my tongue along her eager pulse as my thumb, albeit clumsy and inexperienced, roves against her clit.

Like a wave to the shore, she rolls her hips to meet me, and the distance between us is barely a hair as my teeth tease her skin. My mouth explodes in pain, more of a taut need than I feel even between my legs, my neglected core.

“Stop,” she whispers, and I do, letting my hand and teeth fall away, so I look into her eyes, clouded with pleasure.

“There are places, you know.” With her swift hand, Erzsébet begins kissing my naked breast, and starts to suckle, her bottom teeth applying pressure where pale flesh meets the pebbled inbetween.

And though one hand cups my other breast, she takes the other one, lying dormant but slick on the sheets, and glimpses my fingers over her supple thigh, close to her entrance. Erzsébet’s mouth parts, the heat of her exquisite breaths gusting over my skin. Gooseflesh forms on her arms. She comes to meet my eyes, to touch her nose to mine, a brief, chaste joining. “And there’s here.”

I idly stroke the scarred skin near her crux. I’ve never bitten anyone there, so I must be careful. Leaning close and pulling her to me, I press my lips to the wounds I’ve left on her breasts before I sit up.

She follows, and we move ourselves in the centers of the teal roses, as if poetic lovers in a vast field of them, somewhere in the gnarled Hungarian wilds, our legs so tantalizingly close to being tangled together like briars.

We sit on our knees and, first, I draw her chemise over her head, and she reciprocates.

As we toss them aside, in one fluid movement, I embrace her and put her on her back. She arches a wry brow, a glint flickering across the brown expanse of her look, and I face away from her, raising one leg to go over her, straddling myself over her ribs as I lean down to see her soaked sex.

Leaning over her, I trace my tongue over the stretch marks, long and silvered, thinking faintly that she must’ve seen mine, still an angry purple around the edges. Her breaths grow more strained, so I can hear her voice in them as I kiss her, kneading my nose and mouth into the giving mound of her flesh, soft as cream, and I part my lips further to expose my teeth. I graze one of my eyeteeth where the blood rises and quickens, as if to meet the ringed heat I press there.

Delightfully, she strains against me, breasts against my stomach, as she waits in anticipation. But, cunning as always, her tongue flicks over my thumb, frustrating me further when she threatens to ruin me by slipping one finger into me, followed by another that lightly thrusts into me as her tongue teases me, running from my clit to where her finger claims purchase inside me.

I lavish her lower curves with my sinful mouth; I nip the soft skin at the rounded jut of her hip. She cries out in a moaning laugh.

Frenzied, about to spill over, I sink my teeth into her thigh, feeling it yield as I latch on. To ensure I don't waste her rapturous gift. She releases a low moan as she bursts into me, her blood flooding my open mouth in what begins as a single thick, scorching spurt, but then trickles into me as I flutter my fingers to her entrance and slip one finger inside the damp and pulsing place.

It’s difficult to concentrate on drinking and bringing her pleasure, especially as she pulls away to bump her nose against my inner thigh, only to start consuming my wet slit with more fervor, her pants and thrusts quick but uneven.

I drink deeply of her, content in the feeling of her curves against mine, another finger of mine slipping into her as my teeth sink deeper to taste her, sharp and metallic, my nose prickling with the fragrances of vanilla, woodsmoke, and vellum.

With her open under me, I am uncoiling her like a braid, drinking of this thread to her heart, more potent than the spiciest wine.

Erzsébet sighs when I swallow more of her. “Oh...”

It all overwhelms me as my mouth and throat sing with pleasure, the place between my thighs so close to peaking in bliss with the rhythm of our lovemaking in tandem with her heartbeat rushing steadfast against my throat.

Her pace goes faster but soon, she grows taut and pulls her head away, crying out. I keep my fingers in her as I continue to draw blood down my throat, more drops falling into my mouth as she seizes, her body tremoring with the roll of her climax. I feel her tongue form a hot outline around me, before, at a much slower momentum, she switches to lapping at my, burrowing inside, and fingering my pink, tender nub as her rich blood, like her wetness on my hand, drips down her thigh and smears my chin.

Her lingering vanilla smoke, deepening from sweet to thick and heady, tingles my lips; the husk of her voice, her breath rasping over me.

The buds of my breasts harden under her burning touch, and I’m begging for her to kiss the roses on my lips, so I may bloom.

She murmurs, a prayer, “Go on, go on.”

This is holiness. This is religion.

Entombed in our bodies—my soul, stuck here even in death. forced to make it a home. A temple. Altar, parish, crypt. Entombed but able to navigate this labyrinth of debauched pleasure like King Solomon and his wives. In the blueness of this space that is life and death and neither and both and nothing and all at once.

As I lick circles into her broken skin, my fingers trace a ring around her damp slit before I slide two fingers inside. Meanwhile, the pleasure coursing through my mouth is almost unbearable. Pleasure thorned with pain, or a thorn edged with pleasure.

After, I expected the blood on my lips, but not the amount that stains her mouth and chin. The aftermath of our lovemaking looked as if we gutted a small animal on the sheets, like a wolf killed a little rabbit, and I frowned; I didn’t like thinking of something so soft as violent.

I ask her as we laze, “Have you ever had this much blood on the sheets before?” Before my wedding night, Mother told me I might bleed, but I barely did; I’d worn the skin between my legs away from riding horses.

“No, though before I was put on the birthing stool when I had Orsik, I leaked pink fluid on the sheets. You took a nap here and menstruated against your knowledge. That’s what we can say.”

I frown at the scored sheets. “This is quite a bit of ‘menses’.”

Erzsébet comforts me, “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. We all bleed.” She looks magnificent when I check her nude, eased reflection in the mirror, settled among tasseled pillows like a queen. If only I could be seen there, reclining with her. Without seeing myself, without knowing how I look except for that grinning, green-eyed countenance in her eyes, it can be hard to remember that I indeed exist. Not that everything around me is a dream, but that I’m a dream fading from reality.

“I know. Of course I know.” My smile was tight. “It seems all I’ve ever done.”

My menstruation, which often has felt longer and heavier than normal; my intentional loss of child. Always bleeding, and now, despite no longer having my blood, always needing that blood to survive.

But this is my life, my strength now.

Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green.

Our bed is red; our lips are red. If love is a vineyard, we aren't the vines; we’re the swollen, sensitive grapes. My arousal is blood. Her lips are red with blood. Hers.

Mine.

TWENTY

10th of December

Back at Castle Csejthe, I see Erzsébet less, understandably, though I see her every morning and now sleep with her every night. But during the day, she hears her court and works to resolve the growing raids from marauders.

Today, she suffers not one but two interruptions.

A musician strums his oud in the great dining hall as Erzsébet sits at the end near the angel statues, her gilded chair luminescent with the braziers and hearthlight. Wintry sunlight streams through the high mosaic windows, the angel statues appearing a pinch less grave.

People from villagers looking to speak to the Countess to petty nobles fill the room, the latter group flooding the stone, tapestried hall with light conversation with threads of concern over recent robberies.

When she goes to rise in the late evening, I go to her side and help, knowing her bones are stiff.

It's then that Thurzó strolls in a supple fur lined with purple velvet on the inside.

Erzsébet greets him through clenched teeth cordiality. "Palatine, how nice to receive her. You do enjoy these later visits. A shame your wife hasn't come."

"Of course. Your castle is lovely and well-kept as always. I'm so happy to hear that all the disturbances at your estate have ended."

"What do you mean? I'm afraid the court has been boisterous as of late."

"Oh, I heard whispers of a creature prowling the woods, perhaps injuring people on the property. And worse. But of course, I haven't heard of any families mourning, so I supposed nothing came of it. These things happen, of course. I once had two scullery-maids die, and what met its end with my arquebus? A mother bear!"

That's the first interruption, the conversation devolving into terse niceties and thinly veiled barbs, no longer veiled by music, since the player has long left with red-lined fingers.

Next, as we go to retire for the evening, a figure clad in all black approaches us with a thin black book clasped in both his hands. He is a small, thin man, lined and bald except for a scraggly beard and thin wisps of gray hair.

His voice is reedy as he stops before us, and Erzsébet offers a perfunctory greeting of “Father.”

“My lady, I request that you cease your blasphemy before you plunge us all into pestilence and despair! Do you believe in Christ who was born and died and rose for you and won the remission of your sins?”

Erzsébet replies plainly, “Of course. Everyone in this land knows that Christ is their savior.”

“Please, Countess, if you are truly a believer, take this prayer book and reflect on it.” He reaches out to hand it to her.

Erzsébet maintains her dignified stance, arms stone at her side. “I do not need it. I have housed holy men such as yourself for years, like a mother cares for her children. Like my own mother, most of all, nurtured faith in me. I would hope that you would remember that.”

“You haven’t proclaimed your commitment to even the Lutheran Church. It would do you good to attend church and assure your people of your devotion to Martin Luther’s teachings.”

Clipped, Erzsébet replies, eyes dark as flint. “Yes. Naturally. Worship is always worthy of praise. Why else do we do it, except to have these extravagant displays to prove our own virtue? Sir, I understand that as one of Eve’s sinful descendents, I don’t know about God as much as you, but I believe Christ said that we should pray in private, lest we be like the hypocrites who need everyone to see and compliment their goodness.”

The priest presses the book to his chest and bows his head in despair. “I had thought that perhaps you would come to reason once you moved past your grief over your lord’s passing. You truly are a wicked woman for spurning both churches like this. I fear I cannot help you.”

I feel Erzsébet’s lividly pounding heart as if it’s my own.

After I pull the fresh chemise over her head and straighten the falling skirt, I ask her and her lonely reflection, “Do you think he has spies in your court?”

Erzsébet arches a cool brow as I comb my hands through her thick black hair. “You’ll need to be more specific.”

“Thurzó.”

Erzsébet stiffens at his name, mouth contorted in distaste. After taking a moment to school the murder-flame in her eyes, she waves a hand. “I know he does. I don’t know who, but everyone has at least one. There is no shortage of devout Catholics in our retinue.”

“If Thurzó was fattening my pockets, I likely wouldn’t still be here.” There’d been no talk about me returning home. Perhaps my mother, with her monthly to every-other-monthly letters, thought it best that I be under Erzsébet’s watch and tutelage longer.

Her hand glides to one of mine, seizing my wrist. “Not even to benefit from the ruse?”

“No. No matter what I’ve done, I wouldn’t get into someone’s bed by deception. I know what it’s like.” I lean in, the tip of my nose glancing against hers, and she pulls me into a fervent kiss, her tongue raking against my teeth and filling out joined mouths with her tang.

I can taste the storm still raging in her mind. All her doubts and worries. If only even my own preternatural touch could whisk them away, but not even I can assuage her fears.

Erzsébet pulls away and grimaces. I wonder how she must eat with our constant bloody kisses.

“Damn him,” she murmurs. “He is the Habsburgs’ man, through and through, a dutiful servant to the saints and the Crown. And the Crown has its debts to me. They owed my lord money, and as such, as his widow who now manages all pecuniary affairs in his absence, they owe me money. I remind them, and he comes to oh-so-politely chastise me for my impudence.”

“The impudence of getting what you are owed?”

“Yes,” she replies dryly, “the audacity of a Calvinist bitch who has a family name far more pristine than his. Anyone with more power is a threat to those who crave it, and for a woman such as me to outmaneuver him, well, it’s a grave insult.”

“His wife seemed kind.”

“Oh, she can be. She often sends me herbs she’s found that help her joints, since from a young age, she’s been stricken with aches. Yet, they are perfectly matched for one another. We must take care to ensure there are no more disturbances that will make him suspicious.”

When we retire to bed, her worries echo in me.

13th of December

In the chilled afternoon, the windows and grounds frost-blearied, I wear my shawl; I wear Erzsébet’s kisses; I wear her kisses like my shawl. The dead grass crunches underfoot.

As the pink dusk comes, the cold doesn’t seep into my skin like it used to when I was alive, so I go to the stables, which smell of horse dirt and hay, to ride. I wear a simple linen dress, wanting to be indistinguishable from the other maids. The guards no longer question when I ride so late in the evening.

Unfortunately, in my whimsy, I don’t notice that when the hostler on duty comes behind me in the stables and slams me against one of the wood stalls the farthest from the entrance. The jolt doesn’t hurt me, and I’m momentarily annoyed, hair falling in my face, until he swivels me around with a hateful fire in his green eyes.

He smells of earth and sweat, and hay shuffles under us as his palms dig into both my upper arms, and when he pulls down too hard, the fabric on my shoulder rips.

Behind him, I see another person, a woman of about twenty dressed as a maid, covering her giggles with her death-white hands.

A wide sneer, as the stranger tells him, “She thinks she’s special because that bitch lets her warm her bed.”

I dig my teeth into my cheek, drawing blood, and then I spit out, feeling the heat flooding over my teeth, “Go on, show me what you want.”

He freezes, his arousal pausing at my inner thigh. Transfixed by my bloody mouth, he sticks two of his fingers deep in my mouth. I’m not sure

if he wants to taste my blood or relish my injured helplessness, but it doesn’t matter.

“What,” he murmurs, jamming his forefinger deeper, just narrowly avoiding my eyeteeth. “what is wrong with your—”

I bite down.

Bone crunch against my gums as his howl pierces the air. The horses start to scream, too, thrashing as the stables seem to tremor like Judgment Day. Throomthroomthroom, throomthroom—

I shove him off me, so he tumbles on the hay spread-legged, a loud pop making his gasp in pain. His need stands embarrassingly templed and useless at the juncture of his thighs as I leap on top of him, straddling his waist and burrowing my teeth into the soft, pulsing flesh of his neck. Thumps on my back, tugging—the girl is screaming for me to get off, but as a coppery tang floods my mouth, I can only lean back and bask in completion as a fountain of blood spurts from his ruined throat, and I bury my gaping mouth in him again.

As the sobbing woman, her brunette hair a shroud over her pink, damp eyes, and I stand amid the consternated guards, I can’t help but feel like a child caught misbehaving. By now, it is night, and lanterns hang from gloved hands like little lost ghosts, making the pallor of the faces around me sallow.

When Captain Szabó comes, he looks at me disquietingly, and then at the cooling body as the horses still stomp and cry out.

“He tried to rape me,” I tell Szabó, the entire front of my body soaked back in his blood. Naturally, my explanation does little to put him at ease, and I can feel the small hairs on the back of his neck rise, and see a hint of revulsion. I resent it for him; the blood wasn’t so terrible when he was fucking me.

Before he can say more, Erzsébet arrives as a storm of crimson lace. When the Captain tells her about my ordeal, and she inspects the torn fabric at my shoulder, she seethes, the lines of her face dark and furious. Even I

give a start when Erzsébet stalks beside me where the woman trembles, and she strikes the girl across the face, evoking a shocked, wet sob and a string of blood and mucus flying on the scattered, sullied dirt.

Ever the imperious Countess, she snarls. “You filthy swine. You come under my roof, eat my food—”

“My, m-my lady—”

Erzsébet slaps her again, a string of blood and snot flying from the woman’s nose. I remember her sadistic glee when her man, now dead, almost raped me, and I can’t help but smile before I remember that I’m being watched. Before I care.

“If you interrupt me again, I will have your teats cleaved off.” Some of the watching maids shudder or gasp in horror. “You were given the opportunity to work at my estate, under my name, taking my salary, and then you assault my lady-in-waiting.”

“I, I, it wasn’t me. I couldn’t stop him. I told him...”

Erzsébet looks at me, her furious gaze softening as she waits for my input.

I tell her, “She laughed as she watched.”

Captain Szabó looks between the Countess and me, his gaze dark and imperceptible, and Erzsébet faces him.

“Captain, take her to the river.” She gestures to the woman beside me. “It’s only partially frozen, I think.”

He blinks once, hand over the sabre at his hip. “Yes, my lady. What will be done to her?”

“She will stand in the river for the entire night and pray that the rest of it doesn’t freeze.” Erzsébet, never more strong and beautiful than now, looks at the silently weeping woman. “You will stay there for the night; if you try to leave, you’ll be skewered. And if you live, we’ll see how many toes and fingers you have left. Perhaps you’ll have more than your paramor.”

The woman’s gulps and sobs and broken pleas, just then, needle my heart. And then she falls to her knees as her fingers pull at my dress, ruined from the blood of her lover.

“Please, p-please, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

She would’ve had you raped, as she laughed. She deserves this. Mercy is only a tool the guilty use in hopes that people more noble than them will not

punish them. They want you weak and simpering, so they can take advantage of you. Never.

I cannot change the world yet. If I could, I would make it so such abuses never happen, but with this, I take comfort in knowing that if this has happened before, those women won't be victimized any longer.

I meet Erzsébet's eyes, and she nods at two of the guards, commanding, "Take her now." When they hesitate, their eyes on me as if I'll lunge at them, her jaw tenses. "I don't think that order was unclear. Now."

Captain Szabó approaches me, keeping a distance of a few feet. "How did you kill him? You're absolutely covered in blood."

I meet his disturbed stare. "I, I bit him to protect myself. That's all. I don't know how the strength came over me."

"Captain," the Countess said, voice hard as stone. "Worry about punishing the girl involved in this assault and burying this body. I will tend to my own handmaiden, who's just survived an assault."

Though I cannot read his thoughts, I can practically hear them: *She killed the man, and you say* she *survived the assault?* Yes, it's true, I did. If the unselfish, unmonstrous action would've been to either let them do what they wanted or to have run off and let them find other victims, then I'm glad he's dead. I would do it again a thousand times.

Following Erzsébet to the washroom, I leave a trail of blood and can't help but, with dim humor, think of my first time arriving at the castle. Tallow and must swell in my nostrils as we pass maids with their wide eyes and whispers of horror and confusion.

Dear God, what happened?

And accusations.

Murderer.

Demon.

Monster.

Devil's whore.

When we are in the washroom, I joke to Erzsébet, feet molding against the cool tiles. “You might as well take a knife and cut these off me.”

She regards me with her usual flinty seriousness. “Wait here.”

I do. As an immortal, there’s not much need for me to do anything else; I have all the time in the world, and it’s not a burden; it’s a relief.

I’m not sure I’m relieved when Erzsébet returns with a dagger that even has its own golden scabbard carved in roses and two loops, so one may place it on their hip.

I offer a humored smile. “Ah. Somehow, I knew this would end with you wielding a knife at me.”

As she approaches me, she has her own ghost of a smile. “You’re different since Vienna.” She takes hold of my collar, her knuckles brushing against the column of my throat as she points the dagger downward and grazes it against the blood-stiff fabric, slicing the linen to reveal my body, ready for her.

“Am I?” I rasp, leaning down closer to her lips, as I feel her breath on me, neither particularly hot or cold.

With precision fit for the most fastidious barber-surgeon, Erzsébet unspools the sullied clothes from me and lets them fall. When she’s finished, the blood is still thick on my face, throat, and hair, and I languidly stand by the pool of tepid water.

Not one for patience tonight, Erzsébet says, “Get in the bath.” I shiver not from any cold, but from the coarse command of her voice.

“Funny,” I tease, coyly standing by the bath, letting her see my backside as I shift to look at her. “I thought you liked me covered in blood.”

Erzsébet narrows her eyes. “That man is fortunate that I didn’t get to him first, or he’d be gelded with freezing water flooding into his wound.”

“Oh, my.” My smile falls. “Do you think the woman will live?” My blood-engorged heart tugs because, even as I relished her tears, I now wonder if it would be just to let her die, even with the violence she craved to inflict on me. Christ tells us to forgive, doesn’t he?

She stares unblinkingly, shadows convexing. “I don’t know, nor do I care.”

“Have you ever sentenced someone to that punishment before?”

“To gelding? Yes. When women in the village have been raped, I’ve given them justice. The river, no. That was a stroke of malice in my heart. If

the woman lives, let us hope she finds God.”

“We will see.” Erzsébet’s voice is low as she captures one of my locks between her fingers. “Now, get in.”

I obey, and when I’m finished and smelling of roses, she slips a sheer lace white robe over me, but I don’t let her tie the sash as I wrap my fingers above her elbows and press her into the wall, and we smother each other’s mouths with a colliding kiss. Her fingers brush my hips through the gossamer silk.

She raises her lips to graze her bottom lip against one of my canines, as she lets me suckle on the small nick that blooms for me.

Too soon, she stops pushing, and I lean to meet her smoldering eyes.

“I have something that we might try,” she tells me, voice like waves raking over sand.

I step back. “Oh? Go on?”

She slips the dagger back into its hilt. “Come to my chambers and help me undress, and then I’ll show you.”

Like clandestine, mortal lovers, we slip out of the washroom and into her room where, as she tucks the weapon under her mattress, I taste the fire before I feel it. Smoke, like her, smoke and the raspy huskiness of roses and cloves.

And as you do with husks, at the flame-glittering vanity I take off her shell, tantalizing her as I unravel the laces and loosen her carapace.

“I commend your thoroughness,” Erzsébet says lightly, looking at me through her solitary reflection as she seems to be unsheathed by a phantom. “But I might request that you hasten your work.”

“Oh, my lady,” I reply, barely holding in a laugh while I tilt my head and bat my eyelashes. I wonder what she’ll see when she turns around, how she sees me. “I wouldn’t dream of ever accidentally tearing your fine dress.”

Eventually, I get her down to her chemise, and when she faces me, my thumb roves over the edge of a pink nipple underneath the fabric. Her breath hitches.

“Wait,” Erzsébet murmurs, and I stop. She strides past the vanity and opens her wardrobe with flourish. Leaning down, she lifts the panel of wood at the bottom of the wardrobe and takes something sizable out of the compartment, and then a small jar of what seems to be oil.

She turns and shows me the device she grasps firmly in one fist, a slightly curved, thick wooden instrument with sloped, phallic knobs at each end.

“Interesting,” I say, pondering how easily I might get that inside me. “I can’t wait to see how you intend to use it on me.”

Softly, Erzsébet corrects, “How *we* intend to use it.” A shiver of pleasure crawls up my spine.

As she sets the oil aside and instrument on the sheets near the footboard, I shuck off the robe loosely draped around me and make short work of her chemise.

When we move to the bed, I nestle on the hills of pillows, but not before retrieving a towel from the wardrobe and settling on it. In the haze of sweat, flowers, and woodsmoke, a new sweet smell enters, the oil. Watching her slick up the instrument with those precise hands only floods me with more pleasure, my arousal turning the white towel crimson. Besides the swollenness of the Countess’ lips, especially the red spot where my tooth submerged into her skin, I notice fresh bruises on her upper arms.

Remorse floods me more than it ever did when I killed the hostler. Or even when I learned of that woman’s fate. Whatever her name is. “Did I do this? I’m so sorry.”

She joins me in bed and shakes her head, the plush of her breasts hanging low over me. “Don’t apologize if there have been no wrongs between us.”

As she positions the instrument at the base of me, she leans over me to gauge my reaction. She inches it closer, so I clench around the tip, and a mild ripple of pleasure comes over me. She takes it in a little deeper but stops, leaning to graze her tips against my temple as she fucks me, her other hand winding behind my head to snarl in my head as her lips whisper over mine, and I kiss her.

When my teeth nick her bottom lip again, we each drink her blood, and I fumble to lower her chemise, my thumb roving her freed nipple until it starts to pebble under my lavishment.

As my arousal grows, the instrument starts to slip in deeper at her rhythm, which she keeps at a steady cadence as her tongue caresses mine. Despite the newness of what we're doing, the feeling of debauchery, she's being remarkably gentle. With my other hand, I rub tender circles where the

linen meets her shoulder, and when our mouths part, she offers me her breast.

Opening my mouth, I find purchase above her heart, where the skin has become green from healing, and she clasps my hair tighter as I drink, and her ministrations become more fervent and urgent. It is at first strange to think I am being fucked by her wooden cock as I take her in, but the idea only hastens my mounting need.

Thighs spread, Erzsébet aligns her damp slit with the other phallus end of the instrument, and I spread my legs farther to take in more, clenching around the hardness.

As we fuck each other, plunging the instrument deeper into each other with each movement, the instruments slickens with our arousal.

My only regret is that we can't be closer. I want to embrace her, be inside her, her heart against mine, in me, as we bring ourselves to messy and bloody completion, her thick waves between my fingers, caressing my knuckles. I want to be inside her heart, curling inside truly feeling her heat, both her hands squeezed in mine.

TWENTY-ONE

14th of December

The end approaches, and it's my fault.

And as horrible as it is, I wouldn't feel guilty at all. My patience for pretenses has ended. Let everything fall apart. Let my reputation be permanently marred, so I may flee this life.

But with Erzsébet and her inevitable fate she refuses to run from because of her damned sense of duty—yes, I do feel guilty.

The mood of the castle becomes withdrawn and sullen. The maids whisper and jump more easily, and they pick up their steps when I'm around.

A layer of morning mists hangs on the ground, death-white with glittering frost and snow.

Outside is a procession of stopped carriages. I watch from the window. Erzsébet speaks to both her daughters. Orsik's face is drawn, but her shoulders and chin are raised as she wears a white and gold dress that almost certainly wasn't her idea, her face clean and hair pinned in a thick braid around her head. She holds herself as tall as she can.

Dressed in pale pink taffeta and lace underneath her gray fur cloak, Katherine is more narrow and young, her hair a shock of the light gold of her father's hair, and her eyes a watery blue. As Erzsébet tries to grimly embrace her smallest child, Katherine begins to thrash and stop her feet.

"No, this is stupid! I hate you! I hate you!" She runs off into the carriage, and Erzsébet's look is stricken when she straightens. I wish I could be there by her side. Like Mircalla sends her thoughts across time and space, I think, *I'm here with you. We will see through this.* I can only hope she hears it.

But Orsik gets on her tiptoes and stiffly hugs her mother, who throws her arms around her daughter with abandon.

When she's with me in her room, Erzsébet kneels by the hearth and stares at the fire, watching the wood crumble to flakes of ash. Despite

everything, she doesn’t cry.

"You should go, too,” Erzsébet says with an urgent seriousness. She shifts as I join her on the rug, so we face one another.

“With them?”

“Anywhere.” Her expression is ashen. “I’ve been told that Thurzó is coming with an entire garrison.” As she talks, I see the wounds on the inside of her bottom lip and tongue, and a pang jerks through me.

I grasp both her arms. "I don’t see any reason to leave your side. What can they do to me that hasn't already been done?"

"I don't know, but I know what happens to women who they ask to act as witnesses. You'll be tortured. And you may be able to overpower or elude some men. But a thousand? Two-thousand? Twenty-thousand? And I couldn't protect you."

“My beloved, I'm worried about protecting *you*.”

“I don’t need help being protected. If I wanted, I could kill them all.”

“Yes, kill everyone in the empire. More bloodshed. I’m sure that’ll save me. Am I really that good?”

“I don’t need you to be good to want to protect you against the likes of them.”

“There’s been enough death.”

“They think I’m a demon.”

“They think I corrupted you. That for years, I’ve tortured and killed women for my own pleasure.”

“This is my fault.”

“Whose fault it is doesn’t matter. They’re looking for a reason. If it weren’t this, it might’ve been something else. A fabrication. Some squabble lied about until it became a heinous crime. No doubt I will be arrested soon.”

“Come with me. We can take what we can from your coffers and go anywhere.”

“I will not flee.”

“Why?”

“Because I am not guilty of their slander. There’s nothing that dismisses one’s innocence more than running away.”

Sometimes, we can only rely on our own judgment. And we must accept that when given our choices, we did the most logical thing we could.

“You cannot give up like this.”

Her jaw firms. “I’m not. I will tolerate many things, but you won’t call me a coward. Running would be giving up. If I run, they’ll assume my guilt.”

“They already do,” I argue.

“I have a duty to my family name—”

“What good is your family name without your family? How will it fare if you’re burned alive for heresy? More to the point, I don’t give a fuck about your family name. I care about what happens to *you*.”

“I won’t leave you. Never. I’ll stay with you until the grave.”

“You cannot be captured.”

“They cannot capture me. I can turn into fog and whisk myself away. But when it comes to saving you, I’m useless.”

“No, you aren’t. You are a witness, an eternal one. That’s invaluable.”

After, in one of the castle halls where people are leaving in droves, I encounter a familiar face: Ervin. He isn’t wearing any of his usual livery or even a helmet; he’s in dark riding leathers. Erzsébet had told me he resigned from his post.

Expression guarded, Ervin tells me, “I’m afraid that I can no longer reliably offer my services to my lady without compromising my integrity, nor am I certain I should be involved in any investigations to come, so I will return to my village.”

I grow cold with the knife-wound of betrayal. I think of Mircalla’s dead lover, who was willing to build a tomb where she’d be safe.

And he did, she crooned to me one night. *He built a monument to our love and let me rest there.*

Not everyone can give that. And I suppose it’s unfair to expect it. It isn’t as if I saw our couplings as a grand love affair, no matter how heightened my senses were when I’d drink from him.

“I wish you Godspeed, Lady Esterházy.”

“If you truly think I’m a monster, you should have the gall to take up arms. If you don’t want to defend me, I understand. I don’t need it.” Though some part of me wants it. “But you could kill me.”

“I don’t know what misfortune has befallen you. Nor am I sure that you are the monster.”

“And the Countess?”

“I don’t know, and I fear that I cannot be in a situation where I will be asked, likely under threat of torture, to decide one way or another the fates of all of you.”

In the end, I’m unsure whether to call him Captain or Ervin. I suppose in the end, it doesn’t matter. In the centuries to come, I might remember his beard on my lips or the feeling of the tapestry and stones against my back as he fucked me with my mouth full of his blood. But him, he’ll only be a farewell.

I tell him, “Goodbye.”

He bows his head.

In the end, I don’t think I can blame him. If I were in his position and believed my lady and my lover had potentially killed several people—and indeed, I certainly had killed more than a few, no matter my reasons—I can see why I might resign to avoid more shame. Besides, no doubt everyone arrested and interrogated by the Crown will be put to torture to ensure the desired results.

Next, I find two very young women. A retreating maid, a girl no older than fourteen with black hair and freckles, helping another younger child with a wooden foot held in place with an iron ring, who leans heavily on a walking stick.

Yes, the girl whose injured foot we sawed off. I can’t remember her name; all these keen senses, and I can’t recall. Is it trauma, or did I only pretend to care to preach my own virtue? To convince myself that, no, I’m humble and good, not like the other callous lords and ladies who take advantage of the poor.

Yet even Erzsébet could admit that while she wasn’t cruel to the Romanies, her interests stemmed in rewarding them for being good soldiers and letting them help repair pots and pans. I once thought that her thoughts on predeterminism were harsh because if our destinies are fixed, why care to be good. But then, if kindness is conditional on a reward, is it really goodness?

Erzsébet didn’t extol her virtues over helping others; if anything, she showed kindness because if our fates are fixed, there was no reason for her to make anyone’s lives harder. Might as well make life as gracious as it can be before our eternal destinies.

I wanted my own freedom, but I also wanted to be seen as good and kind and unselfish. Un-Noémie. And was I truly good in the absence of too much bad? Now that that burden of expectation is gone, the absences in who I was feel more obvious.

This is me. From white space to living.

While I can't say I want to hurt the destitute, my focus is now narrow, solipsistic.

As Gorgias would say, nothing exists, and even if it does, it can't ever be fully known or explained. I have felt like nothing, and I couldn't express that nothingness to anyone else in a way they could grasp without their own views seeping through.

Perhaps that's all a person is to the world. Good, bad, only when seen. In five-hundred years, if I exist at all in a line or two in some historical or less than historical texts, it'll be a shade of what's gone through my mind, locked to everyone.

Too sordid, too sinful.

Bitch. Harlot. Demon. Accomplice. Witch who sold my soul be bathing in the blood of virgins and letting Satan sodomize me; no, I fear I missed that step.

Inside...

All that exists is what I want.

All that exists is my hunger, my need to drink and fuck and love under the clandestine embrace of night, and yet...

"Stop," I order, and the young maids halt, their eyes wide when they look behind at me. I'm half-convinced they'll try to flee.

I take something out of my bodice, my fingers smoothing over gems.

I place my aquamarine necklace in the freckled maid's hands. cheeks flushed, her eyes flicker from it, a serpent coiled in her palms, and me, and with closed lips and a nod, they disappear around the corner.

And then, after all that, after the carriages leave, a gloomy quiet sinks into the stones. After a brief supper, Erzsébet confines herself to her room.

In my room, I undress and dress alone, putting on my chemise. I prepare to stay with Erzsébet for the night, not even practicing my steps in my head, when the land begins storming.

Not a true storm. No rain, no lightning. The thunder of an army of footsteps.

When they swoop upon us, I open my door and go into the hall as if to offer a barrier between them and Erzsébet, but when they come, dressed in black and yellow livery, some of them drag me into my room. Their leader is a man with near-white hair and a face red with indulgence.

He points at my mirror. “Look, no reflection!” He unsheathes his sword. “We must penetrate the heart. Hold it down, so we may kill its heart and remove its head.”

I want him to attack me. God! He’s obnoxious. I want the excuse to kill him.

Two men throw me on my back at the edge of the bed and surge beside me, pinning down my arms. Weak, feeble.

My eyes go wide, and I make my voice tremble, careful to keep my bloody tears from streaking my cheeks. “No, n-no, please don’t, please don’t! I don’t want to die. My—my baby!”

The man to my right hesitates, while the ruddy-faced commander leers above and drives the sword into my ribs, missing my engorged heart by an inch. Fool.

Nevertheless, the silver, fine against my skin, burns my insides, and I thrash, smoke erupting from the suppurating wound. The blade hisses out, and more than any heartbeat comes the hammering of their slurry of thoughts.

Devil’s whore, carrying Satan’s seed.

Infernal monster.

Monster monster monster monster monster.

A wolf tending to lambs. Die die die.

Never.

Even if I couldn’t be an undead creature, I’ll be a ghost and haunt all of these lickspittle fucks.

I won’t die again.

He missed. He missed.

Even weak from my injury, which isn’t immediately healing, I snap forward out of their grips and jump on the man, clawing at his shoulders.

Before he can shove me off, his throat folds and crumples between my jaws like rose petals, as I rip out his throat.

The *schiiick* of a dozen swords drawn, and wild, I think that I must go to Erzsébet, but I can’t, they’ve wounded me, they’ll cut off my head, I can’t

protect her if I’m truly dead—

I have a lover. Hell will have to wait.

I fly out of the window, the glass shattering and the iron lattice tumbling away. My body plunges into the darkness where men shout and horses whinny and thrash when I collide on the hard stones below, unhurt except for my leaking wound as I dart on all fours past them all at an impossible speed, faster, faster into the woods.

TWENTY-TWO

1610, 10th of January

After I heal in the shadows of the woods, I watch. Not by crawling from the hollow in a tree I find myself curling into, but my mind wanders until it grows legs, and it carries into the wind like the dead leaves scattered around me.

I watch as Thurzó's wife goes with a band of soldiers to empty out one of Erzsébet's coffers, stealing enough gold and jewels to line a monastery.

I watch as Erzsébet never goes to trial herself; instead, she's locked in her own chamber as her remaining servants are tried and convicted. The three old women.

I stay with Erzsébet every night, but I don't think she can sense me. At least, her eyes distant and blank, she doesn't acknowledge me. She shivers, rests without sleeping, paces, sits, paces some more, trembles more. Always trembles.

As nothing but a ghost, a shade, I also go into the prison and try to comfort the old women. I send words of comfort on the hay and stones, wet and peppered with rat dirt. I embrace Ilona Jo as she weeps and kneels on the stones.

I can become a wisp of air and take myself out between the barred windows, but I cannot take any of them with me. No matter how I will it, I can only shift my own form, no one else's.

Unless, perhaps, I could give someone else the gift of eternal life. How was it done? How was I different? I drank from Mircalla before I died.

I watch the executions of the servants, not Erzsébet.

The women's hands are bloody knuckles, as are the fronts of their shifts, all their fingers and nipples torn off with hot pincers. These elderly women, bruised and shaking and maimed and scored with blood. They must be dragged to the wooden posts, already near-conscious as the fires are set.

I'm alone, and so is Erzsébet.

My eyes and throat ache when I imagine holding my mother to me, her hair to my nose with the peppery scent of búzavirág oil. My heart tightens into a hard kernel.

What must she think of me? What became of me, and what I became? According to the rumors, I was either a demented, Satanic accomplice of Erzsébet's or one of her victims. If I were found, I would've been tortured and burned. But I wasn't found, so I either escaped or died. Certainly, I was no maiden, so I might not be expected to be one of Erzsébet's victims.

I steel myself. I cannot linger on the past. No. Undoubtedly, I will, but I cannot fantasize about what I want it to be.

In fact, I do have the power to change what happens, though I've never done what I'm considering before, and perhaps I'm too much of a neophyte.

And then, my wound, licked by curious deer, finally heals. I'm drained, hungry, and when I tear open the throat of a rabbit as its screams echo in my ears and mouth, I'm only a little sated, so I kill another, and another, until the woods are littered with mangled corpses as brown and white fur fly into the air with the snow.

Once I come to my senses and become a little less beast, I resolve to save her.

My lady. My Countess.

Mine.

It must be me.

They've kept her trapped in perpetuity in her bedroom, cold as a tomb as the wisp of my body seeps under a crack in the latticed window.

I wait, but she doesn't see me at first.

Her hair is limp, and she looks brittle. My heart aches for her. Her eyes stare into the dying hearth, and she shivers. She doesn't see me yet, but when she shifts to look at the door behind her, her eyes are dull and glazed. Dark circles ring them. She pulls her crimson robe tighter over herself and jerks forward.

Erzsébet knocks on her bedroom door, and it opens a sliver.

A man asks, voice rough, "Yes, Countess?" The creak of leather and metal.

She says softly, so unlike herself, "It's cold, good sir. Do you have any other blankets? It won't go away."

“It’ll pass. Go to sleep, Countess. Lie down under the covers, and the fire will make you warm.”

With that, he shuts the door before she can respond.

“Erzsébet,” I whisper from the corner of the room.

She whirls around. She’s deathly pale, except for those blue shadows under her eyes. Those lovely brown eyes.

“Is it really you?” Erzsébet whispers.

“Yes.”

Her voice is a dry croak. “They told me they executed you. Drove a sword through your heart and cut off your head.”

No. No beheadings. I’m not a saint. I refuse to be martyred.

She chokes out a sob and runs her hands down her face. “Tell me you aren’t an apparition.”

I reach forward and cup her face, catching her tears. “I’m here, Erzsébet. They failed. I’m here for you. This is my fault.”

Erzsébet scoffs. “Certainly not yours alone, but yes.” Pain constricts her features. “I’m sorry.” Her voice quivers.

Dear God. They’ve truly cracked her resolve. I pull her into an embrace. “It’s the truth. If Mircalla and I hadn’t killed, you wouldn’t be implicated.”

“Implicated as the Satan-worshiping whore of Sapphos,” Erzsébet murmurs bitterly. “But no, Thurzo, that foul man, would’ve found something to damn me with eventually.” Pulling away, she blinks sluggishly. “Thank God you’re here.”

I caress my thumbs over her jaw. “Always.”

“This is the fate God chose for me.” But her bloodshot eyes flickered away, her fingers to her cracked mouth.

“This is the fate mortal men chose for you.”

“Édesem,” she murmurs, “I know I’ve said we can’t know what the Lord has planned for us. But I’ve known. Since I was a girl whose body would seize and shoot lightning agony through my ribs and limbs. There must be a demon in me, I thought. I’ve been damned since the beginning.”

“None of us have our sicknesses because we are bad. Ill humors and frail bones, those are part of having bodies. Christ didn’t shun lepers. And these people who have wronged you, I’ll kill them for you.”

“Who?”

“Thurzó. The Holy Roman Emperor. Anyone.”

She stares at the hollow of my neck. My saint necklace, dangling there, silent. “God, you really are lost, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m doing what I can with what I’ve been given, as you’ve said. I don’t know how to give you your daughters back, or to bring Ilona Jo, Dorkó, and Darvulia back to life.”

"I'm tired, édesem. We cannot kill every person who has ever hurt us."

“Why not? We have our catharsis, and the world becomes at least a fraction better.”

“The fate of this world is decided. It was decided so long ago by God Himself. We cannot change it. I’ve been given my destiny, and I must accept it.”

“No, you don’t. God, what happened to you?”

“Everything. If you could, you would’ve killed Lord Silvas for me, wouldn’t you? Now, I want us to both have the chance to balance the scales. If God has already fates us to our end, then, what does it matter what we do? We can kill and fuck and *live*, and all that matters is how we feel and how we take care of each other. Maybe this is your fate—to be with me. To live with me for eternity. After all, if it weren’t, why would I be here by your side? Why would any of this have happened?”

Erzsébet laughs darkly, lacing her hands over her stubborn heart. “Perhaps this is what God intended. Or the Devil.”

“Would the Devil’s gifts be so sweet?”

“He offered Christ a kingdom, so surely yes. I’m only trying to decide if I have any concern left which master we will serve.”

We.

She’s considering it.

With an edge, I say, “I don’t serve anyone except myself.”

Here we are, fallen Countess and fallen handmaiden, our power inverted.

I want to tell her I love her, but I think I already have. I fear that I’ll make her feel forced to join me and become something she doesn’t want, so the worst weight leadens my heart: If I’m giving her a choice, I must accept that she might choose to die, and I must respect her decision and let her go.

Words only mean so much. I must show her, all depending on what she chooses.

"Please, Erzsébet. I won’t—if you don't want...I won't make you do anything. Am I a monster to you?"

“No.” I’m not sure if she realizes that it’s a lie. Or that in her anguish, I’m the least of her worries.

Sometimes, we need monsters to protect us.

I’m your beast, Erzsébet. But now, I’ll tell you what will soothe you. “And you aren’t a monster to me. I know the truth about you. We may not be the kindest creatures, but we lived, and I chose to be free. I know there’s someone waiting for me, and I want to show my gratitude. But if you want to remain here”—die here—“I won’t tell you can’t. I won’t force your choice. If you want me to leave, I will. But I want to wait here with you, for as long as you wish for me to stay.”

“Don’t leave me.” She rubs her hands across her face. “Let me think. God, let me...I can’t think. Please, come here.”

I kneel by the fire and gently wrap my arms around her shoulders. She leans in.

If Mircalla, my sire, is waiting for me somewhere in the world, then I’m here to wait for Erzsébet, no matter what she chooses.

She whispers, voice cracked, “Perhaps this is providence. Another night, and I was going to try to hang myself. Or, well, they didn’t take away my dagger under the mattress.”

I squeeze her closer to me, my cheek on her tangled, oily hair.

Erzsébet murmurs, “You said someone is waiting for you. Who?”

“My maker. She lost herself, but I can feel her...she’s found herself, and she’s waiting for me to find her, too. And I want to. At the very least to thank her. And though I’ll live with what you choose, I want you to be there, so we may have our little haven in the world, just the three of us.”

“You cannot free me from here as I am.”

“No.”

“So, you wish to make me like you.”

“Would it be so terrible? You said that you don’t think I’m a monster; I’m not sure I agree, but I’ve learned that being a monster isn’t the worst thing. For once, you can have what you want without compromising yourself.”

“Even after you kill someone?”

I answer plainly. She deserves the truth, even if it makes me sound like a monster. “There are ways to reduce the guilt, depending on who you target.”

“I’m tired of being cold. No matter what I do, I’m only ever cold, except when you’re with me. Stay with me. Please.”

“I’ll stay as long as you need.”

Erzsébet inhales a deep breath and keeps it inside her.

Then: “All right, then. Make me like you. Kill me.”

Her words don’t strike me as painfully as I thought they would. After all, I’ve killed before, and at least in this instance, I can hope that I succeed in changing her, and that she returns to me.

“Are you certain?” I ask her.

“*Yes,*” she says, hushed like a prayer, like a command.

I recall the night that I decided that I was tired of my old life, that if Mircalla wanted to bring me into the folds of her night-embrace, then so be it. I wouldn’t continue my mimicry of a life. I wouldn’t marry Lord Silvas. I wouldn’t return to Mother, even if the thought causes a small pang.

Rising, I go to the bed and reach under the mattress, my finger twisting around the dagger’s cool handle and surfacing it. When I approach her, still kneeling, her gaze shifts from my face to the blade skeptically.

Unsheathing the dagger and going on my knees by her side again, I offer it to her, and she accepts, her chilled fingers grazing mine. I unlace the front of my chemise, revealing the plane of skin below my collarbone.

“Go on.” I tell her. “You’ll need to feed from me and have a part of me in you when you die.”

Swallowing thickly, Erzsébet saddles closer to me, so our knees brush together. She wields the dagger in her left hand, eyes half-lidded, lips parted. In this light, despite the shadows under her eyes, I cannot help but soak in how beautiful she is. Reaching out, I breeze a hand over hair, not quite as full and velvety as it usually is, but nevertheless a lovely color. What streaks of silver I see are only illuminated in the fire, like spider-silk.

As I circle my thumb on her cheekbone, she presses the cool, sharp tip of the blade over my heart. I let her dig it into the exposed flesh, dragging the knife across to open me up for her.

When she burrows into me, I clasp the back of her head, feeling the tug of my heart, my immortality flowing into her.

After she’s done tasting me, she pulls away, lips shining, and nuzzles her nose against mine.

“Go on, édesem. Please.”

“My love,” I whisper, clasping her shoulders as we kneel by the fire. My lips peel back. She leans back, exposing the pale column of her throat.

I bury myself in her, her body hot and flush against me as my teeth prick the side of her neck, slicing through skin and muscle. She opens for me like a rose, and her smoky honey pours into my waiting mouth.

She tenses, and then weakens, her hands on my back until she starts to slump, and they fall. She falls, and I catch her, blood dribbling down my chin and throat.

Erzsébet rattles one final breath, and her heart stops under my hand.

“God,” I cry, holding her corpse. “God.”

No one answers.

TWENTY-THREE

13th of January

As if preparing for a funeral, I don the green dress Erzsébet gave me in my old room. Somehow, it escaped being pilfered yet. I wear her gift and my cross, along with a sable and silver wolf fur cloak.

After I've torn open her casket, like a supplicant, I kneel by Erzsébet in the family crypt for three days, until the four candelabras surrounding her catafalque have died, and I've torn off her pall to gaze upon her tranquil countenance, pale and unmoving as her silken burial gown, the collar pearl-studded lace.

I do pray. I pray that I've succeeded. Selfishly. I don't want her in Heaven, away from me. It's terrible. Would it be horrendous if she found Paradise?

Don't leave me, Erzsébet. I have so much more to experience with you. You're mine, not God's, like I am Mircalla's. God, leave her be.

On the third night, in the dark I can see through like it's midday, her corpse shudders, and I rise to my feet, letting her and her body adjust to the surroundings. That change where "the body" becomes her again, unlocking that compartment that captured her soul as it captured mine on the autumnal forest floor.

All I do is grasp her hand and let her convulsions pass.

As her twitches subside, Erzsébet blinks sluggishly. Her lovely brown eyes fall on me, her pupils large and pulsing.

Her voice is quiet in contrast to the howling wind above. "You're here."

I offer a sad smile, stroking her hair, which is stiff. "Of course, my Countess. I told you I would be."

"I'm not a Countess anymore. I'm..." Clutching her throat, Erzsébet rasps, and I help her into a sitting position. It's so dark that the only lights are our eyes, which glow of their own will like a cat's. "This hunger truly is unbearable, isn't it?"

I rub her back, remembering how frustrating the first few months of my transformation were. “The first time, yes, when you’re void of any blood.”

Her mouth twists into a frown. “I think I now understand why you went mad.”

“Come, drink from me for now. I have more than enough.” Leaning close, partly cradling her to me, I sink my teeth into the inside of my wrist, drawing blood to my canines.

I offer her the wound, and she tenderly cups my hand in both of her. Dainty, almost, afraid to hurt me.

“Drink what you want,” I tell her. “Don’t restrain yourself. You won’t hurt me, and no one will judge or hurt you here with me.”

When she presses her lips and begins to lap and suck, I can sense the moment her disposition changes, as she buries herself in the tiny fountain of offered blood, and her fingers tense across my knuckles. Her feeding sends twinges of pleasure up my arm, the pleasure augmented by the dull pain as she pulls blood from me.

Her lips are smeared crimson, eyes squeezed shut in concentration like she’s trying to think of the sharpest barb to put in a letter.

When she finishes, Erzsébet clamps both her lips shut, trying to keep all my blood inside her. When she swallows it all, she blinks slowly at me. Glassily. “I think that might be the best thing I’ve ever tasted. Thank you.”

“Better than before?” I ask.

“Yes, because then, I wasn’t thirsty.”

I offer a small smile. “Compliments to the chef. I must admit that I still prefer chimney cakes.”

Erzsébet’s eyes dart around the family crypt. Where her parents lie. “Where do we go now? I need out of this gloom.”

Helping her stand, I say, “I know where to go.”

At midnight, the black carriage comes for us at the edge of the forest path. Under the horned moon, the horses make no sound.

Without another word, we enter it. No one is there but us, as we sit across one another, and despite there being no driver, the carriage starts traveling as soon as we close the door.

A deep frown etches Erzsébet's face, her eyes hooded with fatigue.

She's sullen, and I cannot blame her. She's unmoored and in this tenuous new state. She died.

And she must be thinking of her daughters with her sister in Poland. Her lost family. Her lost reputation, after all she tried to do.

Her legacy.

Fiercely, an impulse comes over me. She's mine. I made her. As her sire, I must protect her. If she has no reason to live besides spite, I must offer it to her. Or simply support her as she finds her place in this new life. We forfeit legacies for longevity, for this commitment.

I reach forward and squeeze Erzsébet's hand, and she squeezes back.

We're free to do as we will. I must let her feel the joys at that, but first, the grief. This quiet. When I don't know the true language of her grief, just as she doesn't know mine, just as no one can ever truly understand, an unlonely silence will have to do. Or maybe it's both of our lonelinesses finding safety in each other.

Erzsébet, if I cannot make these wrongs right, I'll give you myself. The strong may eat the weak, but we are nothing if we don't reach out to those we love. We pass through a gray haze of post-rain fog and lines upon lines of stalwart conifers and bare trees, as pine and petrichor waft through the air. The path we go down is unsteady and constantly jolts the carriage.

I'm unsure how long we remain in the carriage, except that it becomes day at least once through the dark curtains, and that's the only time we part to sleep. Through my doze, I feel eyes on us as we pass.

When the world becomes pink and purple with the gloaming, we both startle awake to the signal of a journey's end: the violent bone-clatter of crossing a wooden drawbridge.

"Dear God," Erzsébet grumbles, stiffening in her seat. "Somehow,the heightened senses make carriage rides worse."

I offer a soft smile. "Trust me. I know."

The carriage halts before a looming castle, the stones darker than the limestones of Erzsébet's former home. When we approach on foot, the

wrought iron gates open of their own accord, though there is no wind, and show us a lonesome drawbridge. I hold Erzsébet's hand.

A woman glides down the sloping stairs, her rich brunette hair pillowed on her shoulders. She wears a moon-blue dress spiderwebbed with lace of gold and silver, a pale circlet of rubies around her head.

Mircalla.

Moonlight bride.

She clasps her hands together and smiles warmly, as if we're all old friends. "I'm glad that we can finally have this moment. It feels like it's been forever. Come. It's quite dusty and cobwebbed without servants, but I've prepared my solar."

I say to her, "Thank you for the carriage, though I must question how it brought us here. Do you have control over the horses?"

Mircalla's smile is enigmatic. "What horses?"

"There were horses. I can still see after death."

She leans and kisses the tip of my nose. "You saw horses. It doesn't mean that they were there."

She guides us to her solar of gray stones with vibrant tapestries of nude women and fields and a writhing hearth. The fire plays on empty porcelain tea cups. No. I inspect one. Not entirely empty. The residue of blood.

Mircalla sits in one of the chairs; there are three, two on one side and the one she resides in. "It's quite nice. I went to Vienna, and this doctor gave me a substance that will stay the drying of blood. Ah. I was a bit of a brute, wasn't I? It's a pity. I'm sorry. I do *so* despise rudeness."

Erzsébet says, "You killed several women."

Mircalla pouts. "Yes, I'm sorry. I can't imagine the mess; I always mourn when I get blood on a beautiful rug. It truly is a curse to be a vampire with good taste and have to shed the one fluid that's impossible to get out."

"A tragedy," Erzsébet deadpans.

"Thank you. I've been alone for about a hundred years. I was alone. After about half of that, having the incessant knife of hunger always there with no one to understand, it made me weary. It drove me mad." Mircalla's brow creases sadly. "My family bloodline died shortly after I did. My love, well, of course, he was long deceased. With no one around anymore, all I could think about was blood. I was mad."

Mad with grief.

Erzsébet's narrowed eyes scrutinize Mircalla. "What made you realize yourself?"

"You. I think that when we bonded, when you agreed to my embrace, I felt my humanity again."

I ask her, "Were you intentionally inside my mind? My dreams?"

"I don't believe so. Some part of me called to you, as you called to me; I had dreams, too. Of running in the woods with another girl and making potions in kitchen pots."

I say, "I imagine it is difficult to have lost control and killed."

Mircalla gives a little laugh. "Oh, don't misread me. I love killing. I don't care if God forgives me or if I'm truly a monster because, well, fighting for the acceptance of those who ruined me and deemed me a witch and a whore never got me anywhere. That said, I don't tend to enjoy killing the innocent. They make an awful fuss about their mothers."

"Do you feel any guilt?" I ask her.

"I suppose, but it feels distant, abstract. Useless. My guilt won't help any of those people come back. It's really selfish, pining over whether I deserve punishment or if I'm finally absolved. I cannot control God. I can only work to control myself."

"That's certainly one way to look at it," Erzsébet replies.

Mircalla looks at her. "Do you disagree?"

Mouth a dark line, Erzsébet shakes her head. "I suppose I don't. We can worry as much as we want, but God has already decided where we fall."

I tell Mircalla, "I don't want to kill innocents, unless necessary."

Necessary. When is it necessary? I suppose with all the centuries in front of us, we'll find out. And maybe, too, I can let go of my guilt. Such as when I killed...the maid. Rabbit eyes. I can't remember her name.

Worse, it's a lie to say I didn't enjoy her death. I was horrified, but for once, I felt whole. In being unkind and monstrous in a way that will never let me pray in a monastery and be accepted by devout, Christian society, I've found love and freedom.

I'm not lonely. So if the occasional person dies, what does it matter to the state of the world, regardless of whether our fates are already ordained or not? Altruism and guilt and shame never saved me.

I look at Erzsébet and clasp her hand again. “I know that you said that we cannot kill everyone who has wronged us.”

Erzsébet is quiet as she considers what I’ve said. “Certainly, it seems more perilous than beneficial, but if you’re thinking of who I believe you are, I can’t say you’ll hear a protest from me.”

I tell Mircalla, “I’m not interested in bathing the world red, but I would hope for as long as we live, it might become more just.” I stop as I say it, wondering if I mean it, or if this is another instance of me wanting to appear good.

No. I want justice, but I know it won’t be dainty and sweet.

I won’t bathe the entire world red, but to revenge my injuries, yes, there will be blood.

Mircalla’s smile is wide but softly edged. “There would be quite a lot of people you’d need to kill to make the world just.” She caresses where my dress meets my collarbone. “It does sound enjoyable, if occasionally tedious.”

My jaw is set. “We live for an eternity, don’t we? I’d say that’s a suitable amount of time. That said, I do have one request I’d like help with. A debt to be repaid.” I glance over at Erzsébet, whose eyes darken in recognition, and she settles her hand on mine.

“Go on,” Mircalla chimes, primly posturing her furled hands under her chin. “I’m listening.”

TWENTY-FOUR

15th of January

As the sky pours its tears, Lord Silvas' manor is modest in contrast to even my old home, the stones gray and the roof a brazen scarlet. It'd be easy enough to climb the trellises of dead roses against the pelts of green moss.

We don't need to clobber up the trellises or stones, however. As I fade outside a windowsill, a mist blotches the diamond-shaped glass between thick thorns of iron.

There he is in his study, hunched over a thick tome in only his ghost-white undertunic and breeches. The candlelight and hearth illuminate his silver-blond hair, from his head to his peppered beard. I can't help when my fingers curl, and my nails scrape against glass.

His head shoots up, and his dark blue eyes lock with mine. I can hear his heartbeat, and I can't help but laugh when the blood drains from his face, the light rendering him frail and sallow. As he stands, the silver candlestick tumbles on the blue lily rug, burning a small, smoldering ring in the silk as the milky pools of his eyes widen, his pupils almost swallowing the blue.

He's much smaller than I remember. Sick, maybe. Even through the window, I smell sweat, smoke, and blood right beneath his skin. His pulse rabbits in his throat, as waxy as the tallow on the floor.

Lord Silvas runs.

Rather than smashing through the glass, I glide along the parapet, and I feel my companions, too, like we are one. They, too, glower down at him from the windows. I imagine what Silvas must see in the windows, as he wanders wild-eyed and madly through his shadowy halls. Three ghostly women, their outlines dissected by iron lattices.

We chase him to his bedroom, where he swings the heavy wooden door shut with such strength against the hinges that the creak and slam echoes through the halls. I wait outside the window, letting my body turn into shimmering wisps, until I stand inside the room, as he cowers by the entrance, hands spidery and shaking against the wood.

“Béla,” I whisper, stepping forth as the window opens behind me, and the violent storm gusts spiral through to the room and disturb the red canopy. My hair billows, rising off my shoulders.

He whips around, pressing his back to the door, hand on the knob and making it tremble. “You.”

I tilt my head. “Yes, me. Very good.”

“I—I thought you were dead. How did you get in here?”

“I climbed so high up, and this is all you have to say to me, your future bride? Not even a kiss?”

His mouth briefly clamps shut, and his jaw shifts; I imagine him pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth, feeling the crescent scars of my teeth marks.

Myriad emotions thunder across his face, the skin pinched around his eyes, which rove down my long legs, visible through the thin fabric of the chemise as moonlight strikes my body, and I cast no shadow. His gaze brims with both desire and disgust. As I approach the high column at the end of his footboard, he wars with whether to fuck me, try to kill me, or run. I can’t help but grin, and he shivers as his attention falls to my mouth.

Then, his mouth curls into an ugly sneer. “What do you want, money? Weren’t you that bitch’s Satanic whore?”

I’m not sure whether he truly wants an answer, or if he’s trying to goad me in his twisted idea of a game. Foreplay.

“Is that what you’re truly worried about?” I ask, smoothing my fingers over the cool grooves of the wood column impaling the silken folds above my head. In a fluid motion, I fling myself on the edge of the bed, dipping into the vermillion ripples, lined with silver designs of corpulent figs and poppies, my arm draped over the crest of the footboard. He’s frozen in place, struck by fear and seedlings of arousal.

No, I don’t intend to sleep with him. To lure him. Even in gruesome murder, I’m not so cruel as to do to him what he did to me. Oh, I’ll debase him, but not like that.

Besides, I don’t want his rancid cock in me. Only his blood will do.

He gives a start with glimmering fog drifts into the room, and I rise into a sitting position. This time, despite the fire, he shivers from a chill, caging his body with his hands as two columns of white, incandescent smoke appear in the center of the room before him.

“Devils! Witches!” Instead of yanking open the door to flee, he raises a fist to strike Erzsébet, but as it falls, she catches his grip.

Eyes sharp as knives, she pivots his entire hand and wrist in a circle, and as the snap of bones and tendons fills the air. He howls in agony, and Mircalla holds an elegant hand to her mouth to laugh.

“You stupid little man,” she jeers through her fingers, “you are terribly funny. Noémie, my dear wolf, do you want us to hold him down?” Erzsébet still has him firmly in her grip as twists like a worm.

“No,” I rasp, meeting his watery eyes. “I have him.”

With the same feral energy as when I shoved the hostler to the ground, I lash out with impossible speed and clench my hands around his arms, my grip as tight as a vise. No, tighter.

My nails crush the skin underneath his tunic; the white blooms with blood. His bones splinter under my enraged grip. He shrieks, but no one comes to save him.

I can’t quite tell if the sound that rips out of my mouth is a laugh or a growl.

Voice high and pleading, Silvas cries out, spittle flying out, “Please, I’m sorry, God, I have to care for my mother, please—”

Damn his mother, and damn him. I’ll erase his name from history. Yes. I’ll erase his face. That’s all he is—a hideous, callous face over a sack of blood.

I pout and mock, “*Mother, oh Mother!*”

But I don’t start feeding.

Instead, my hands burning, my face contorted in a toothy snarl, with little finesse, I drive my knuckles into his face, his nose cracking as he squeals and thrashes under me, his nails clawing uselessly at my arms. I smash and shatter his bones, my fingers coated in blood and the pop of an eyeball melting into a hot, pinkish white stew in its socket.

His body goes slack as his horrified and furious expression caves into a pulpy slush of blood, skull shards, and brain matter.

“Go on,” I growl. “Let me see the scar I left on you.”

With my wet fingers, I break apart his hideous sneer, teeth flying on the rug and clattering with force against the walls and mantel.

It takes me a long while to stop, after he’s been dead for minutes.

Mircalla’s chest heaves, her mouth open as she wantonly pants.

Erzsébet’s expression is grave, but not damning. Instead, she kneels by my side, ever the portrait of concern.

“Are you all right?” she asks, countenance softened.

I’m free. I’m free. I’m free. And I have them to love and be loved.

As the pool of blood spreads to stain my knees and calves, I release a laugh light as a tiny bell. “Yes, I’m fine. Please kiss me.”

Her fingers bloom over my cheeks as she draws me into a smoky, wet kiss, our tongues pressing into each other as she licks the gore from my bottom lip and front teeth.

God, my Countess, my life, my dragon. Az én sárkányom.

With their help, I crack him open like a pomegranate, unpetaling away his ribcage and burrowing into his lungs to find his dead heart. I bend low and gnash my teeth deep into it; his heart is a tough knot of sinew, but I make short work of it as I tear it open. A wellspring of hot bursts into my mouth, its tang deliciously singing on my gums. Mircalla and Erzsébet drink from the fountain of his open chest.

We are disheveled and blood-drenched and my cunt, too, is soaked and spilling down my thighs.

When I was a girl, I’d worry over a misplaced word or an averted eye, possible slights that would have Mother’s mouth set in a firm line.

I don’t regret anything at all.

We all stare over his ruined body.

It’s beautiful. The bodies lining the path to my freedom. The cracking bones. The drained hearts. All so beautiful.

Beside his cooling corpse, on the rug by the roaring flames, blood drips in hot rivulets down my chin and throat, coating my collarbone and breasts.

Despite being ready to tear off my blood-blackened chemise on my own, I let Erzsébet pick up the golden letter opener with a rose-decorated handle off the nightstand. I go to rise, but she kneels and takes hold of my collar, where the crimson forms patterns on the lace.

The need pounds relentlessly between my legs; I must have her; I must have them.

Mircalla pats my arm and nuzzles my cheek. “Come, little wolf. We have until the end of time to make love on a bed. Tonight is special.”

When I kiss her, the blood in my mouth leaks into hers, and Erzsébet claims my sullied chemise in her fist and drags the blade down, liberating

me from the fabric, thin confine that it is.

I tear open Mircalla’s chemise and dig my fangs into the top of her breast, and she squeals with delight. Leaving a bite on her smooth skin, I drag my tongue down to lave her pink nipple.

Erzsébet’s hot mouth stamps my back, and I arch it when Mircalla’s arm slithers down, and her fingers dance past my clit and over my drenched opening.

With my Countess pressed behind me, Mircalla slips inside. Two fingers become three, four--she shoves her entire hand into my hilt, and I cry out in pained ecstasy in our embrace.

Inbetween kisses, I whisper, “Don’t leave me. Don’t betray me.”

They cling to me in a vow, a prayer:

Never.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgan is a horror, fantasy, and romance author. They have a soft spot for all things dark and gothic, especially vampires and an array of castle-dwelling monsters. They've also never written an angel that they didn't want to make at least a little weird-looking. Their books include *A Flame in the Night*, *Witch Soul*, *Providence Girls*, and *King of Hell*. They live in the Southern United States with a menagerie of ill-behaved cats and dogs, including a malevolent tortoiseshell named Satan. More about their work can be found at morgandante.com.

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